August 2020

Accountable Witchcraft: A Story-Theory Account of The Witch as a Site of Disruption for Whiteness and Colonialism

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Abstract:

In this thesis, I seek to wed my experiences of activism, scholarship, and Pagan witchcraft community together through storied theory, in order to give an honest account of my own transformation through both scholarship and community action. I do this for many reasons. Because I want to honor the Queer interracial organizing community who saw me, built me up, opened my eyes and inspired in me an ethic of accountability and critical analysis of the world around me. Because I want to heed the call of scholars like Lisa Flores, Langford and Speight, Nakayama and Krizek to engage in reflexive scholarly praxes that explicitly seek to interrogate and disrupt colonialism and racism within the academy. Because I have felt so lonely and desperate in my search for a spiritual practice that resonates with me and doesn't steal, erase, or perpetuate violence against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color Communities. And because in engaging in this personal journey and coming to a place of fulfilment and purpose, I believe that I might be able to help someone else do this too. Specifically, I seek to demonstrate through the stories of my own experience that it's possible to be a white scholar who engages with racism and whiteness in transparent and productive ways and who is generous and respectful towards the communities we "study," that it's possible to be a white witch whose spiritual praxes contribute to the liberation and decolonization of BIPOC and these lands, and finally that Pagan witchcraft communities, rituals, and identities themselves are powerful sites of potential for politicized, action-oriented transformation and coalition building. I approach Pagan witchcraft as a distinct discursive formation with complex etymologies that are entangled in the origins of the industrial, settler colonial, and white possessive culture we live in, and in so doing seek to demonstrate the value of this kind of etymological work to witches and scholars alike, as well as to defend the validity of Pagan witching discourse as a rhetorically powerful entity in and of

itself. In order to do so I seek methodologies that emphasize critical reflexivity and prioritize embodied epistemologies, praxes which I find most abundant among BIPOC scholarship, Indigenous feminisms, and the radical edges of communication scholarship. Specifically, this work is a critical autoethnography that seeks to transparently weave personal narrative and scholarly theory in order to synthesize a more felt, embodied picture of the relationship between popular Pagan discourse and colonial rhetoric, and to map the potentials for a witching culture that prioritizes coalition building and action in the pursuit of social justice.

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by

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B.A., University of North Carolina - Greensboro, 2015

Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Communication and Rhetorical Studies

Syracuse University
August 2020

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Acknowledgements

Throughout the course of this work, I have lived on and travelled through the lands of the Eno, Sappony, Catawba, Shakori, Onondaga, Pomo, Gàidhlig, and Tuscarora peoples. I understand this land acknowledgement to be more than a finite moment, but rather an ongoing a commitment towards concrete decolonial action. From this day forward, I pray that I may I live in alignment with my highest purpose: to help repair the legacies of colonialism and steward the rematriation of the land to her Indigenous peoples.

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Introduction

The Pulse Between the Pages

If you lose your keys, or your lighter, or your rings, and if this keeps happening, and if you feel like little things are constantly going missing, then tell the Fairies to give them back! And say "thank you" when they do. And remember not to step on mushrooms, that's their house. Find a place for your knick knacks to live. Throw out old food when it's dead. And if you dream that you're flying away, remember to come back home before sunrise. And don't play with those Ouija boards, you might find out something you didn't want to know. Or worse, you might invite something in that wants to hurt you. I know, I seen it happen.

There are some family sayin's, mother's warnings and imaginations I never stopped believing in. A way of recognizing the life in things and myself as having a relationship with them. Maybe these little bits of magic are part of why Mama and I find ourselves seeking out a little eclectic spiritual shop when we drive into the city. It's summer and I'm home visiting from school. I just got back from a research trip to California Witchcamp, and all the storytelling and sharing I've been doing has gotten her excited to renew her exploration of her own spirituality. So we find ourselves walking into the little store. It's like many others I've been to- prisms, crystals, and windchimes hanging all around, vibrant drapery and tapestries, ancient-looking plants sprawling on shelves full of books, cards, oils, candles, herbs. And of course, the shop cat yawning lazily in the corner. We breathe air rich with the thick smell of smoke and allow ourselves to wander. I

always feel a sense of calm when I walk into shops like these, and I love to slowly work my way around.

However, it feels different this time. That blanket ease and interest I feel in spaces like this one is pricked with a tension that I used to be able to overlook, but no longer. When I open a book from the stacks, I see something in the spaces between the words. And in the spaces between the shelves, it's there too, a pulse. An echo, a face, a being, full of feeling and refusing to be brushed away. In the scent of burning sage I smell also the capsaicin in the pepper spray used by police against Indigenous Water Defenders at Standing Rock, charged with assault for defending their sacred lands with protest and ceremony, including the use of white sage.[1] I smell the dust and dry dirt of a landscape barren of this sacred plant due to overharvesting, in the mad rush to fill the shelves of shops like these and even shops like Urban Outfitters, for largely white hands and white homes.[2] On the shelf I see High John the Conqueror oil, and when I ask about the witch who made it I learn that she is a nice white lady and an old friend of the shop owner who lives in Florida with her cats. I wonder if she knows that High John the Conqueror was a folk hero to the enslaved Africans of the American colonies, whose mythos is wide and full of resistance and humorous trickery against white supremacy. He was said to have revolted and killed his masters, leading a successful rebellion for weeks and inspiring his people in a wave that rushed around

[1] Arrest of the Standing Rock protestors was widely covered by news outlets in 2016-2017, including the *New York Times, NBC News,* and *The Guardian*.

[2] For the updated status of Sage as an endangered watch-list plant, see Leopold, Susan. "What is Going on with White Sage?," *United Plant Savers*, 2019. Among many other Neopagan appropriations of Native spiritual practices, the sale of white sage bundles by large corporations and white shop owners is a source of much protest and outrage in Native communities, especially as they are marketed for smudging, a term which describes specific ceremonial practices of healing and cleansing and cannot be done by outsiders. See the *Declaration of War Against Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality*, as ratified by Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota nation leaders at the *Lakota Summit V* in 1993. See also Pike, Sara. "Blood that Matters: Neopagan Borrowing," *Earthy Bodies and Magical selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community*, University of California Press, LA, 2001, pp.123-126.

the countryside before he was finally defeated; some say he was never defeated but shifted form, ever a trickster rebel, returning to his kingdom on the shores of west Africa. Does the white witch oil maker know that High John root, coveted among many reasons for its ability to aid in the quick and lasting success of any spell, bears this legacy of Black resistance, resilience, and innovation?[3] If she did, would she still make it? And would the white owners of this shop sell it? And would I buy it?

I experience this as a mounting tension that pulls apart my comfort in this shop, my comfort in watching myself and my Mom browse, and my comfort with my own Pagan library and practices back home. This tension has been building for many years, as I slowly learned to open my eyes first through deep activism and now through scholarship. As a white person, I do not arrive at this awareness on my own nor am I capable of perceiving every nuance or instance of cultural theft that happens within Occult spaces or my own practices. My knowledge is grounded in the Queer relationships I forged with my co-conspirators as an organizer in the movement for racial justice in North Carolina. My community of Black and Brown, Queer and Trans movement leaders who challenged me to recognize and subvert my own place in systemic oppression; the blessing of their love, patience, and firm boundaries directly precede my ability to hear the silences. And my white movement comrades, who struggled with me in beginning the process of deep unlearning and healing that we have to do in order to be capable of true solidarity with our

[3] High John the Conqueror root is heavily used in contemporary and historical African American rootwork and conjure. Zora Neale Hurston's collection of folk stories about High John support his significance and connection to the root that bears his name. She states in her 1943 article that "High John de Conquer went back to Africa, but he left his power here, and placed his American dwelling in the root of a certain plant. Only possess that root, and he can be summoned at any time." "High John the Conqueror," *Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature.* Zora Neale Hurston, "High John De Conquer" *American Mercury 57* (1943): 450–458. Harry Hyatt, *Hoodoo, Conjuration, Witchcraft, and Rootwork, vol. 1,* 1970, pp. 455–457 and 593–595.

kindred, precede my capacity for doing so. And all of us so young, inexperienced, painfully and lovingly piecing together a vision for a place where we all belong. They taught me that solidarity is an ongoing process, and it demands authenticity, vulnerability, listening with my whole being, and being moved to act with integrity.

It's been a year since me and Mama went to that little witch store, and I'm still trying to weave together a story that teaches me to tease out the gaps in Occult texts, the silenced histories of Pagan tools, and to make sense of how I can be so calmed and nurtured by spaces like these at the same time that they make me feel deeply unsettled. There are shadows here, sinister both in their form and in the fact that they still remain largely ungreeted, unanswered, and unreconciled. Luckily, "shadow work" is becoming a familiar concept in the witching world as collectively we realize more and more that the parts of ourselves that were brushed aside, shamed out of us, traumatized into silence, never went anywhere but in fact are still very much alive inside of us and rampant from the sting of neglect. More books are published every year, more rituals invented for the purposes of greeting the parts of ourselves we are most afraid of, asking them what they need, and integrating them into a deeper wholeness. Interestingly there's a kind of scholarly parallel to shadow work that has been building for several decades now within my own discipline of communication, fostered by BIPOC and Queer scholars and their allies like Amber Johnson and Benny LeMaster, Lisa Flores, Olga Davis, Catherine Langford and Montené Speight, Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek who urge scholars towards explicitly interrupting racism in the academy, developing a praxis self-reflexivity, and interrogating the hegemonic shadows in our departments whose healing and integration can yield the birth of emancipatory frameworks and radically imaginative epistemologies.

My goal in this work is to contribute to this forward momentum in both realms, those of popular witchcraft and academia, specifically communication and rhetorical studies. In doing so, I find it paramount to remain steeped in the humility and accountability required of me from organizing in community, and to allow what I learned with my body, heart, and mind in the streets, meeting rooms and couches of the Queer south to give me a feel for the underlying texture of the texts that I read in my research. It is from this empathic grounding that I strive to move forward; there is a reciprocal relationship between radical scholarship and activism, after all- even if this is rarely recognized in the mainstream academy. In order to do so I seek methodologies that emphasize critical reflexivity and prioritize embodied epistemologies, praxes which I find most abundant among BIPOC scholarship, Indigenous feminisms, and the radical edges of communication scholarship. For example, in the co-authored essay "Writing the Intersections: Feminist Autoethnography as Narrative Collaboration," Tellez et. all demonstrate via their collaborative process of writing, sharing and reflecting across different intersectional positionalities, the potentials for feminist co-creation grounded in community, ever asking "how have our histories of living race, gender, and sexuality informed our work as feminists, scholars, writers, and activists?"[4] They find that through their dialogic process of holding each others' stories they are able to build fuller perceptions and liberatory praxes, and that this process is in fact essential: "it is that liminal space between witnessing and coming to terms with that witnessing which is fertile grounds for the growth of feminist consciousness…our stories reveal that in-between space that opens up spaces of imagination."[5] In order to build more

[4] Tellez, Michelle et. all. "Writing the Intersection: Feminist Autoethnography as Narrative Collaboration," *Journal of Narrative Politics*, 5:1 2018. p.30.
[5] Tellez, Michelle et. all 2018, P.43

encompassing and nuanced understandings of our cultural contexts, as well as strategies for liberation, we need to hold space for each other, to be transformed by mutual witnessing and moved to act in solidarity from a place of committed relationship. In the course of this work I hope to build from helpful theories and praxes like these that call for the creation of knowledge explicitly grounded in embodied relationships and transformative witnessing.

I was brought to magic and witchcraft by witnessing it in my own family- as a means that my Aunts, Uncle, and Grandmothers used to both resist abusive relationships and to heal their families and children. It was something we did in reaction to the violence or pain in our lives, or it was something that happened *to* us in the case of visions or voices or healing powers of touch. Later I learned the vocabulary and tools of witchcraft from books, popular figures, and community spaces like the little witch shop. Then, as I was transformed through shared struggle and relational witnessing in my Queer organizing community, I had no choice but to bring my awareness of and commitment to dismantling white supremacy to both the familiar context of magic and my budding scholarly praxis. This joining is blessed by a natural resonance. Witchcraft and magic deeply value the liminal, the same state of in-betweenness that Tellez et. all invoke as "opening up spaces of imagination,"[6] spaces to vision and manifest worlds outside the paradigms of oppressive systems. This capacity within the liminal to facilitate radical imaginations of a world capable of uplifting intersectional bodies and experiences, is the great driving factor for my continued investment in magical and witchcraft practices and communities. I have learned that it is possible to engage in a witchcraft practice that isn't passive, but active, forever returning to the commitment to create new knowledge grounded in the transformational

[6] Ibid.

force of my Queer community, relationships, and scholarship. So I find myself asking- how *exactly* do I hold in generative conversation the experiences of witchcraft, activist community and feminist scholarship, and do so in a way that remains transparent and authentic to my own blessings and limitations as a white trans witch scholar committed to a praxis of liberation? How do I carry this with me when I return to occult spaces and witness the dissonance between rhetorics of magic and healing that occur alongside cultural theft and erasure, two threads integral to the web of white supremacy? And how do I do so in a way that honors others on the same journey, and helps to make the path a little clearer, a little lighter? I am guided by these questions as I seek to craft a thesis that examines the relationships between colonial legacies and popular Pagan witchcraft discourse, a task I undertake through an honest and reflexive account of my experiences as both a witch and a scholar coming to terms with the implications of my research on my spiritual practice.

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> "I don't find answers. Only the capacity to dig deep inside, purging my past in an attempt to help someone else's ability to deal with their own shit. These are my stories. Our stories."
>
> - Amber Johnson 2020, "Beauty in the Intersections: Reflections on Quiet Suffering"[7]

As I come to the page, I seek a way to honor these questions and in so doing weave an analytical framework with story with a call to action. It's not easy critiquing my own witching community and this intentional looking starts with critiquing myself, the places where my own assumptions, practices and experiences fall short of the anti-racist aspirations I nurtured in activist spaces.

[7] Johnson, Amber L. "Beauty in the Intersections: Reflections on Quiet Suffering," in Eds. Johnson, Amber L. and Benny LeMaster. *Gender Futurity, Intersectional Autoethnography: Embodied Theorizing from the Margins*, Routledge NY, 2020, p.112

Thankfully, rhetorical scholarship offers a structure for thinking through the concrete ways that legacies of colonialism and white supremacy are able to be re-invoked or subverted in the moment, and how we as speakers, movers, and cultural creators interact with hegemonic or marginal scripts in varying ways, given the complexities of our intersecting positions within dominant frames. And thankfully, Black, Indigenous and People of Color scholars offer a vast repertoire of Queer, Indigenous and post-colonial feminist frameworks within which to direct and center my analysis, and a few key methodologies for doing so. In the field of communication this looks like what Amber Johnson and Benny LeMaster call "intersectional autoethnography," which "when taken together…allows authors to unpack complex layers of power systems that chaperone experience. [It] helps the narrator and reader unpack the roles patriarchy, racism, sexism, binary gender, and colonialism play in in their experiences and provide complexity, nuance, and possibility for emancipation."[8] It's a methodology that centers the story behind our theories, because doing so allows for a critical praxis that does more than critique; it highlights the often occluded, deeply personal reasons we are called to this work, and in so doing models the kind of rich reflexivity required of scholars, witches, activists, and all people if we are to dream a liberated future together. We unpack "our own biases and linguistic choices because they connect to larger systems of structural power…(personal is political)." Practically, "autoethnography highlights three concerns: (1) how cultural practices shape identity, (2) how identity shapes cultural performance, and (3) how publicly responsible autoethnography addresses central issues of self, race, gender, society and democracy, through imagination, intellect, reflection, and emotion." Furthermore, this methodology is embodied, because "in order to pursue the body as a site of (not)knowing, one must position the body by examining the

[8] Johnson, Amber L. and Benny LeMaster. *Gender Futurity, Intersectional Autoethnography: Embodied Theorizing from the Margins*, Routledge NY, 2020, p.8

social identity categories tied to the body, and the respective systems of power that chaperone how and why bodies move through the world."[9] Such an embodied methodology is quite salient to the experience of witchcraft, because both engage with the body as a portal, exploring how it affects and is affected by external realms be they material or spiritual. Finally, this methodology is messy. In order to do it justice I am called to commit to radical transparency, to revealing my own imperfect process and exposing my own moments of not knowing, to resist the temptation to present myself as objective and perfectly knowledgeable as is so often the case in traditional scholarship. Luckily for me, I'm already familiar with this process in the witching context of "shadow-work." And luckily for me, "Autoethnography likes people who aren't afraid of their own dirt."[10]

Magical Methodologies

Before I get too deep into the stories I need to map their contours, and to remain intentional about how I define who "we" are. Contemporary witchcraft as a whole is neither homogenous nor static, but is rather a multiplicity of traditions whose collection under this label are marked by varying amounts of enthusiasm and uneven exchanges of power and knowledge. As a white witch I am most familiar with what I call popular Pagan witchcraft, and this is largely who I am addressing when I talk about "we" and "our." I define Pagan witchcraft as a discursive formation which is culturally imagined to have a direct connection to the ancient/ancestral practices of the European witches who were persecuted during the "burning times" or the Inquisition, a legacy which finally culminates in the famed Salem Witch Trials. Though cosmology and praxis vary

[9] Ibid.
[10] Johnson and Lemaster 2020, p.111

with each individual or tradition within Pagan witchcraft, a survey of contemporary witching texts reveals the strong association of the "witch" as a positive category of identification, aligned with varying degrees of reverence for nature and the life in all things, communion with the spirit realm, and the cultivation of personal power. A witch is something you want to be and actively seek to become, not only because it offers a desperately needed alternative way of life than is available under our current political and economic climate, but also because it connects us to the healers and wise people of the past, our Ancestors of practice and perhaps even bloodline. This particular self-identified connection is documented in vast detail by texts emic to the Pagan witch community as well as by scholars. For example, historians Ronald Hutton and Marion Gibson among others note thread of Pagan witch desire to identify with a long and unbroken lineage of ancient magical practices.[11] Gibson comments how within our popular witching discourse, "past and present are also brought into a new relationship by all the neo-pagan groups that we have surveyed. Many suggested that it was perfectly possible to resume a millennia-old, largely or partly lost, religion in modernity with appropriate adaptations and re-writings."[12] Our connection to past practices is considered to speak to the resilience of our culture and the beauty and integrity of our spirits, because in spite of the greatly documented efforts of both Christian and secular powers to erase witchcraft from the world, we its cultivars remain. We use our methods of magic to affect change in our lives, the lives of our loved ones and clients and depending on the witch, and the outer world. It's a space of personal and communal power as well as a cosmology, philosophical orientation, and lifestyle.

[11] Hutton, Ronald. *The Witch: a History of Fear, from Ancient Times to The Present*, Yale University Press, 2017; Gibson, Marion. *Witchcraft, the Basics*, Routledge: London, 2018
[12] Gibson, 2018, p.132

To get a feel for this witching culture, I find it helpful to take a brief survey of popular witching texts. In his recent book *Ancient Ways for Modern Days* popular occult writer Raven Grimassi writes that while it's difficult to strictly define what a witch is, "it is in the 'enchanted worldview' of the witch that we can find a definition for her or him. Here we see that the witch believes in a consciousness that inhabits all things…Perhaps more so than any other single marker, the art of magic denotes the witch." He goes on to list other characteristics in addition to this intrinsic animism that are essential to defining the witch identity, namely communication with the dead as well as the spirits and deities of the land, resulting in a deep relationship with nature.[13] Additionally, contemporary Pagan witchcraft has been interlaced with notions of feminism and empowerment for women and Queer people since at least the time of the feminist Goddess movement of the 1960's, though many witches imagine it to have always been a feminist culture.[14] Popular writer Pam Grossman released a book this year in which she contends with the cultural formation of witchcraft identity. For her, identifying oneself as a witch "…is an act of reclamation, an expression of autonomy and pride…The witch is the ultimate feminist icon because she is a fully rounded symbol of female oppression and liberation. She shows us how to tap into our own might and magic, despite the many who try to strip us of our power."[15] Especially in the last decade, participants in Pagan witchcraft culture have increasingly identified witchcraft with feminism and resistance to patriarchy, as well as heteronormative and even capitalist overculture, as evidenced in popular titles such as Federici's *Witches, Witch Hunting and Women*, Sollee's *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*, and her more recent book *Becoming Dangerous:*

[13] Grimassi, Raven. *Old World Witchcraft: Ancient Ways for Modern Days*. Weiser Books, San Francisco, CA. 2011. pp.14-16.
[14] Gibson, 2018; Hutton, Ronald. *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. Oxford University Press, 1999.
[15] Grossman, Pam. *Making the Witch: Reflections on women, magic, and power*. Gallery Books, London. 2019.

Witchy femmes, Queer conjurers, and Magical rebels.[16] This orientation to witchcraft is where I situate my work because this is the discourse within which I came to understand myself and my family members as witches, and through which I have learned the majority of my practices. It's a discourse that regardless of my discomfort and tension within it, has held me, nurtured me, and shaped me to the extent that I cannot truthfully distance myself from it, nor do I want to.

My relationship with Pagan witchcraft is personal, and lately is has also become scholarly. As I've come to the formation of a rhetorical framework for understanding Pagan witchcraft I arrive at a tension that is both unsettling for me personally and rich with uninterrogated meaning and potential, as both a site of study for scholars of discourse and more interestingly for me, a potential space of coalition building and social transformation for witches. My troubles lie in the ways that our contemporary Pagan mythos of an unbroken succession of witchcraft practices explicitly contradicts what scholars and historians know from a vast array of texts; witchcraft is not something that has always been understood to be positive, and I'm not just talking about the authorities. Prior to the nineteenth century, witches were blanketly understood as evil-doers, people who used magic to actively harm their neighbors and kin. There was a distinction between witches and folk magic practitioners or "cunning folk," whose primary purpose was actually to protect their clients *against* witchcraft and to heal disease.[17] These folk healers are perhaps more aligned with whom today's Pagan witches imagine ourselves to be descended from- so then why call ourselves witches? Historically, the distinction between witches and cunning folk was dissolved in the interest of persecuting any and all folk practices outside of the

[16] Federici, Sylvia. *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*. PM Press, CA. 2018.; Sollee, Kristen. *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*. Stone Bridge Press, inc. 2017; Sollee, Kristen. *Becoming Dangerous: Witchy Femmes, Queer Conjurers, and Magical Rebels.* Weiser Books, MA, 2019.
[17] Hutton 1999

confines of Christianity, but the fact remains that a *witch* was never something anyone would want to be.[18] At least, not until after the European esoteric revivals of the nineteenth century when reclaiming lost magical folk practices from the dustbins of history became both desirable and fashionable, a discursive shift which just so happens to coincide with the growth of industrialism, colonialism, and global capitalism.[19] This confluence is not lost on me, and it complicates my comfort with everything I believe about the etymology of my own practices, and it's a key tension I explore throughout my work.

The witch as a discursive phenomenon emerges from a connotative gap in time, one which is more complex than I'd ever imagined and which still calls out from between the lines of Pagan witch texts, from the shelves of our shops and within the rituals we design. There is a deep, rich, and troubling relationship between the appendages of empire and the discursive formation of our culture, a history which resonates today in our own notoriety among Indigenous people for appropriation, cultural theft, and unchecked white privilege and racism.[20] It's also a place where I seek possibilities of intervention, hoping that if I can honestly and reflexively disentangle the threads of theft and violence from our discourse, what remains will be both nourishing and transformational. As far as the boundaries of how I define who "we" are, the witch's connotative gap in time is also the reason why I hold that the popular Pagan witchcraft of today is its own distinct and contemporary formation, despite our mythos of direct and unbroken continuity between ourselves and the "witches" of the past. More specifically, Pagan witchcraft as we know

[18] Hutton 2017.
[19] Hutton 1999.
[20] Aldred, Lisa. "Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sundances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality," *The American Indian Quarterly* 24:3, 2000, pp.329-346

it developed from the white-feminist take on the Goddess movement of the 1960s, which built off the grounds laid by Gardnerian Wicca in the 1940s and 50s, which descended directly from the Occult and esoteric societies of the mid nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a lineage which is marked by shared practices, mythoi, leaders, and language.[21] Geographically, Pagan witchcraft is both intrinsically European and American, as the European esoteric revivals from which it stems were transferred to the Americas during the violent process of colonization, and from there took on its own shape and culture in what has now become a nebulous exchange of cultural development contained within a unified witch imaginary. And as with any popular imaginary, we are not without our trouble.

The trouble of our etymology emerges when it comes time to be honest about Pagan witchcraft as a popular discursive formation today. Despite our European mythos, it is imperative to recognize that there are many different appropriated and geographically diverse traditions within witchcraft spaces. It's also crucial to leave space for the fact that popular Pagan witchcraft is only one of many discursive fields through which contemporary practitioners come to claim the identity of *witch*. In light of this complexity I am careful to define Pagan witchcraft as a discursive *context* rather than as a unified entity. It is my hope in doing so to also leave space for the nuance of witchcraft traditions and communities that draw on or are influenced by multiple discursive fields at once and in ways that are *not* simply appropriations, such as is the case with many witches immersed in diasporic communities and magical traditions. In keeping with this nuance, I could never claim that all witches practicing today can be grouped under the banner of Pagan witchcraft, nor are majority white and Euro-focused. Especially recently thanks to the

[21] Gibson, 2018; Hutton, 1999

advent of platforms like Instagram and the popularity of online blogs, I am witness to a proliferation of and heightened visibility for Black, Indigenous, and Brown practitioners of magic, whether they use the term witch, bruja or priestess, among many others.[22] BIPOC witches have always been integral to our communities, and Pagan witchcraft itself has been directly influenced by BIPOC witches from the onset. In fact, I would argue that Black and Brown witches are the innovators of much of the method and theory of Pagan witchcraft, and the problem is the often exploitative nature of that influence followed by its erasure in the voice of the mainstream, white and Eurocentric Pagan witch. This is a tension I long to unravel, to seek the nodes of potential for amending it and manifesting the conditions of coalition. That's why my key commitments in this work are to mapping out the nuanced layers of frames that we call on when we come to identify as witches within the popular Pagan context, so that we can both acknowledge and support the BIPOC witches within our communities, and consciously forge a witching culture that values accountability to and solidarity with the struggles of diasporic and Indigenous peoples. This is a possibility I deeply believe in, and deeply need to realize if I am to sustain my own spiritual needs at the same time that I show up in meaningful ways for the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in my life and community.

I have hoped to sketch here the briefest of roadmaps, an outline of the discursive field I come from and also wish to understand in nuanced, honest and accountable ways with the aid of the rigor and support of my scholarly discipline. As I alluded to in the beginning of this introduction, this isn't something I can do in the span of a traditionally-styled research paper, nor is my

[22] To witness this for yourself, a simple search of the hashtag #witchesofinstagram will suffice. Some examples of popular Black and brown witch cultural producers are @Bossybruja, @Witchdoctorpoet, @healer_wounded, @reikimedicinegoddess, @Valeriathemexicanwitch, and @Asha.frost among many others.

audience traditional. While it's true that I write for a committee of graduate advisors, I also write for scholars who are interested in the nebulous and dynamic developments of popular discursive formations/communities/identities and their potentials for coalition building within social justice movements. And most dear to me, I write for the benefit of other witches and for myself. Coming into my own as an activist, scholar, and person has meant that I deeply long to live my life and fulfil my needs in ways that are both ethical and actively contribute to the lives of others in my community, especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Color to whom I owe so much of my own transformation and knowledge. I have also found this imperative to be at great odds with the spiritual discourses available to me as a white witch, and it has been quite painful and lonely seeking a spiritual path that nourishes me without taking from others. At the same time, the breadth with which an informed rhetorical framework allows me to engage with the relationships between my own desires for spiritual fulfilment, my disappointment in the etymology of my discursive community, and the relationship this all bears to the formations of colonialism and racism, has given me the hope of finding a way through. My hope in writing this is to put into the world something I wish I'd had- an honest interrogation of Pagan witchcraft's etymologies and entanglements with empire, a model for how to honestly work through them, and a generous and loving exploration of the great potential that remains within this discourse in spite of them.

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"I realized that research can change a person, and by extension, our world. Much like the opposite of demolishing a building and breaking the bridges that connect us to our pasts, writing down these narratives generates an archive of experience that may never die; our stories, memories, and connections not only live on, but keep changing the world into one worth preserving."

- Amber Johnson and Benny Lemaster 2020, *Gender Futurity, Intersectional Autoethnography*[23]

As I embark on this work, I seek to weave a rhetorical, postcolonial, and Indigenous feminist framework into a cohesive narrative that wiggles within a loosely linear story arc of my experiences of reading and integrating that theory. My goal is to as transparently and explicitly as possible map the messy and imperfect process of my exploration and excavation of the witching culture I love, within the supported structure of my scholarly work as a graduate student in communication. My hope is to offer an "archive of experience,"[24] a testament to the deep and radical potential I feel within witch community for both personal healing and radical coalition building. My format generally mirrors the narrative structure with which I opened this introduction- namely story with some theory where appropriate, followed by theory with some story where appropriate. The afterwards of each narrative vignette is structurally framed by key quotes which I believe to be salient to those specific moments, with the intention that they help ease the integration of scholarly text and embodied memory. The afterwards sections also function to frame the location of each vignette within the larger analytical framework and anti-racist witchcraft praxis I seek to build.

The first chapter of this work is both a love letter and an anchor. I write it in gratitude for the experiences I had during the research trip I took to California Witchcamp, a week-long educational retreat in the Reclaiming Tradition of Pagan witchcraft between my first and second years in school. It consists of four vignettes that encapsulate profound and moving experiences I had at camp, facilitated by the camp organizers' ritual design and communal leadership. The

[23] Johnson and Lemaster 2020, p.4
[24] Ibid.

afterwards of each vignette seeks to map the deep discursive power of such rituals for both individual and communal healing and transformation, relying heavily on Queer frameworks for grief and remembrance, rhetorical scholarship around embodied epistemology and relational witnessing, and performance theory around ritual pedagogy.

The second chapter steps backwards in time to the moments directly before and during my first year of graduate scholarship. In this chapter I work linearly to trace my development as an activist, scholar, and witch in order to explicitly name and give credit to the BIPOC-led, grassroots activist community that planted and watered the seeds of my passion for transparent analysis and active resistance of oppressive rhetorics. I honestly explore the emotional motives for my movement from organizing into scholarship and come to clarity around my resonance with radically transparent scholarly methods, heavily emphasizing the roles of the BIPOC scholars whose work I read in my courses, and who push for an explicit and reflexive praxis within the communication discipline. I mark the moments where witchcraft and magic become sites of scholarly engagement for me and how this synthesis is wound into my own familal legacies of entanglement within the reproduction of colonialism and whiteness. Finally, I trace the great opening that happened for me when I came to Indigenous feminist theory in my second semester of work, and how this facilitated the budding growth of a magical praxis explicitly centered around moving into right relationship and coalition with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. I contextualize my own desires for a liberatory and authentic magical praxis within the contexts of colonialism and whiteness, and set the stage for the next phase of my work to develop it.

The final chapter explores the nascent moments of my development of this praxis. I return first to another aspect of my experience at Witchcamp which complicates the Eurocentric mythos of Pagan witchcraft as well as troubles my own simplistic understanding of cultural appropriation within its culture. I explore a concrete moment in which BIPOC leaders within Reclaiming manifested the conditions for the making of witches through explicitly politicized acts of solidarity, coalition building, a ritual framework that resonates with postcolonial analyses of global matrices of power. The final vignette is temporally the most recent, and it tells the story of my own culminating journey to the *Skelling, Skeklers, and Guising* conference at the Scottish Storytelling Center in Edinburgh, and my subsequent pilgrimage to the shrine of the Cailleach, a land-deity local to the central Highlands. I deepen the unsettling of my own desires for authentic connection to a praxis that resonates with me culturally, climaxing in a moment of crisis that ultimately gifts me a clarity and purpose around how to move forward. Key to this moment is the synthesis of Indigenous feminist theory and the background of the analytical and etymological work I have been doing within Pagan witchcraft discourse up to this point.

II

A Thank-You Letter to California Witchcamp

Trans Trolls under the bridge

Several thump, thump THUMPS echo out from under the bridge.

“Who GOES there? What are your PRONOUNS?”

My friend giggles frantically as water drips down their arms from the branch they had just wrenched from the creek bed and were now thrusting above their head at the underside of the bridge.

“WE are the Trans Trolls under the bridge!”

The passersby hesitate at first, seemingly self-conscious of their small audience, the six of us holding our sides from laughter on the small rock beach below. But then they humor us: “She/her!” “She!”

“You.. May.. Paaaasssss!”

The bridge crossers join us in laughter and then carry on their way. My friend turns to us, offering the branch. “Does anyone else want to try?”

I volunteer immediately: “ME!”

Our spontaneous game marks the end of a small group ritual focused on affirming ourselves by invoking our connection and accountability to the venerable Transcestors Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera first, and then by extension to all of the Transcestors across time whose names we didn’t know. When we concluded the ritual, we focused the energy we had raised and gathered and, with our minds and bodies, sent it to the generation of trans kids to come, an offering of hope to brighten the closet if only a little. The stones we stood on as we ritualized trans solidarity and playfully asserted transness into the night from the liminal space beneath the bridge, were the same that had held me as I confided in the group earlier that week:

“I’m think my partner is going to leave me for a cis girl. She told me she isn’t attracted to me anymore because of the changes in my hormones. It makes me feel ugly.”

One of my new friends responded: “It is your birthright to be loved and to feel desired. Of course you’re upset!”

Not just loved, but desired. A spark, a seed, a tea light in the night. Its brightness suddenly clarifying for me how much heaviness and shadow surrounded my admission. The loneliness of knowing that I no longer passed within the binary limits of desirability, my worst fears confirmed by my own partner. The fears of- who will want me? Will I ever be loved? The weight

this puts on my decision to continue medically transitioning. But I had been offered a spark of an option of another way of thinking.

To be *desired*. A glowing coal I tucked into my heart. That I could keep to breathe into flame. That warmed me as we all danced in our ritual circle and shouted into the night:

"We are enough,
We have enough,
We do enough,"

A spell against imposter syndrome. An offering to each other and ourselves.

"The riot is in our blood!
Hecate's army rising up!"

A commitment to fighting under the command of Hecate, goddess of justice from the margins, by honoring the fight and resilience of our trans foremothers. To explicitly remembering that Pride was a riot, and Black and Brown trans women are the divine gift who breathed life into an entire queer community. Who inspired us to cast stones into the water as we called out their names, "Sylvia!," "Marsha!," and the living "Major!," a gesture towards bricks thrown, or was it a high heel?[25] Who both modeled how and gave us permission to fight for love and the right to just *be*. Who we must refuse to see whitewashed in the streets of corporate PRIDE events and the

[25] Vargas, Chris and Jessica Posner, "Remembering "Consciousness Razing—The Stonewall Re-Memorialization Project", *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 6:2, 2019, p.150

racism of white queer spaces. Who we are obliged to honor through the acts of loving ourselves and protecting Black and Brown trans people.[26]

And who inspired us to play now, too, under the bridge at camp. Because there must also be joy. I wished so desperately to hold that laughter inside me forever, to keep away the heavy loneliness of shame and grief. But for now, I knew that a glowing coal was all I could bear to maintain, so I tucked it inside and held fast.

***

"I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster."

- Susan Stryker, 1994, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage*[27]

The salience of trolls as a metaphor for transness is not lost on me; transness as monstrous is a common trope, but it's also a material reality felt by many of us whose bodies expose and exceed the performative boundaries of gender.[28] To come out, to move forward with our transitions is to become intimate with relational uncertainty, in self, in family, and in lovers as we lose all pre-existing guideposts for where and how we fit in relation to others.[29] To know in our bodies: "The shape of my flesh was a barrier that estranged me from my desire."[30] My desire to be *desired*. To know myself as deserving of love, to know a guidepost, a blueprint, a frame of reference,

[26] Calafell, Bernadette."Narrative Authority, Theory in the Flesh, and the Fight over The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 6:2, 2019, pp. 36-37
[27] Susan Stryker, 1994, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ 1, 1994, p.* 240
[28] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble,* Routledge 1990, NY
[29] Heinz, Matthew, "Relational Uncertainty," in eds. Capuzza, Jamie C., and Leland G. Spencer, *Transgender Communication Studies: Histories, Trends, and Trajectories*, Lexington Books, 2015, p.46
[30] Stryker 1994, p.246

anything that promised someone like me the potential to find relational fulfilment. The troll is also feared, is also ugly, is also antithetical to family, relational safety, and desirability. The troll is also a magical creature.

> "I assert my worth as a monster in spite of the conditions my monstrosity requires me to face, and redefine a life worth living."
>
> - Susan Stryker 1994, My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage"[31]

In order to assert our agency within monstrosity, the Trans Trolls chose to use relational, ritualized play. When it becomes part of ritual, like the bridge and the place under the bridge our play creates a supra-logical space, a liminal space, beyond the limits of the quotidian. It opens up the possibility of exploring the dissonances, connections, and potentials between our internal and external realities.[32] In the Reclaiming witchcraft tradition, play is understood to be a core part of ritual, essential to our ability to do magic that affects material change in ourselves and the world. "Playing is *doing*," it's creating and entering a space both inside ourselves and outside in the realm of bodies.[33] It's a space where real issues, tensions, and traumas can surface to be navigated and rearticulated.[34] The Trolls used ritual play as space to "perform our unlearning of

[31] Stryker 1994, p.250
[32] Huizinga, John, 1949. "The Nature and Significance of Play," in eds. Bial, Henry and Sara Brady, *The Performance Studies Reader Third Edition*, Routledge, NY 2016, p.157
[33] Winnicott, D.W. "Playing A Theoretical Statement" in *Playing and Reality*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1971, p.41
[34] Ancelet, Barry Jean. "Falling Apart to Stay Together: Deep Play in the Grand Marais Mardi Gras" *The Journal of American Folklore*, 114:452, 2001, p.164

cisheteronormativity,"[35] to trans the air above the bridge[36] where all who passed entered a state of (de)gendered potential, of compulsory and intentional self-articulation through the inherent frames suddenly made visible by the question: "what are your pronouns?," and the double entendre of the permission granted in uttering "You may pass."[37] The tension of this moment was relieved, graciously, by laughter.

"Queer relational modes provide the ground on which healing and thus queer worldmaking are enacted."

- Benny LeMaster, et all, 2019, "Unlearning cisheteronormativity at the intersections of difference"[38]

We found the Trans Trolls because we were "hurting, non-binary [and] trans subjects navigating a cisheternormative culture." [39] Our intimacy was accelerated by the compression of spending a week together within the camp's energetic boundaries, and by the recognition in each other of our mutually dislocated entrapments in the web of gender articulation as well as the tensions of where our experiences differed across intersections of identity. Through this explicitly trans, and explicitly queer relationality we crafted a group ritual with the intention of affirming our inherent rightness, one in which we trusted each other with the collective task of re-creating the gendered metrics of desirability through collective magical intervention. One that required us to be

[35] LeMaster, Benny, Danny Shultz, Jayvien McNeill, Graham (Gray) Bowers & Rusty Rust. "Unlearning cisheteronormativity at the intersections of difference: performing queer worldmaking through collaged relational autoethnography," *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 39:4, p.342
[36] Stryker, Paisley Currah and Lisa Jean Moore, "Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?" *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 36:3/4, 2008, pp. 11-22
[37] LeMaster, et all 2019, p.342
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.

reflexive about where we stood in relation to each other and to other trans people who are our ancestors and living siblings. Specifically we were a group of non-Black trans people, and so we affirmed our worth in the same breath with which we energetically bound ourselves to the responsibilities bequeathed to us by our foremothers- to love and protect Black and Brown trans women and youth in the same moment as we love ourselves. This ritualized commitment became a requisite to accessing the Divine, manifested as inspiration for and permission to love ourselves as we are.

"…I think of queerness as a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity."

- Muñoz 2009, *Cruising Utopia*[40]

The Trolls' spell for trans worldmaking depended deeply on performing trans-relationality across queer time, wherein we trusted in the capacity of our ritual performance to rewind time, "bind people and places across disparate geographies, identities, and temporalities; and ultimately, revise and repair trauma through a performative 'claiming' of experience."[41] We affirmed our worth by trusting in each other's affirmations in the present, an enactment of a "…queer futurity that is attentive to the past for the purposes of critiquing a present," where we must still fight tooth and nail simply to say *I am worthy*, where Black Trans women are still not safe, and where the youth are not yet uplifted.[42] We affirmed our bodies in the present as magical vessels

[40] Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York University Press, 2009, p.16
[41] Prior, Jaclyn. *Time Slips: Queer Temporalities, Contemporary Performance, and the Hole of History* Northwestern University Press, 2017, pp.126-127
[42] Muñoz 2009, p.18

connecting Transcestors to descendants via our commitment in ritual space to conjuring a repeated resistance, the repeated imperative of our pro-Black, pro-Brown, and explicitly political Transcestors: trans past to trans futures, trans-potential thrown across time into a future that will inevitably celebrate us. And so:

"We end with love. Relationally derived self-love.

And we are ready.

To continue."

- LeMaster, et all 2019, "Unlearning cisheteronormativity at the intersections of difference [43]

All of you is welcome here

We make a huge circle of 60 or so people around the fire, joining hands where we cluster together and holding onto one or the other end of a long scarf when the distance between us is too great. The intention is to create an unbroken circle, moving slowly clockwise with unified side-steps for the length of an entire hour. Inside the circle a ritual leader calls our attention to the variety of healers standing within, to announce the services they offer free of charge. Anyone can offer healing, and anyone can seek it. There are energy healers, channelers and readers, acupressure and massage therapists, among others.

[43] LeMaster, et. all 2019, p.347

The ritual begins as the circle starts its rotation and a slow, repetitive chant rises and falls. I step within, suddenly shy of the rotating faces of the circle-holders and of the multitude of self-identified healers. My feet begin to carry me to one particular spot close to the edge of the circle, and I let them. The next sensation I feel is the bending of a cot-sized mattress pad as I sit down on the makeshift expanse of a bed, or several tiny plastic mattresses arranged next to each other on the ground. I lay down next to the woman who had moments ago announced that she was a sex worker offering a platonic "cuddle puddle," a place to touch and be touched without fear. The chant is low and melodic, with the last words of each line drawn out and down:

"My body is a living temple of love…
My body is a living temple of love…"[44]

I am on my side and she wraps her arms around me from behind. Behind her someone else settles in, a man who reaches his big hand across her body to rest it on my shoulder. I cover my face with my fingers so that I can peek through at the faces of the circle-holders who rotate so closely past me. They each look at me in turn as they step and sing, step and sing past.

"My body is a living temple of love…
My body is…"

A dam. Leaking under the pressure of waves and glaciers, moving through a melting-ice ocean moving through hot whirlpools. I am a passenger, clinging to slippery driftwood.

[44] Sterling, Susan. Songwriter for California Witchcamp 2019.

“My body is…”

A stranger. A vehicle that carries me as I struggle to connect to it. A vessel that matches but doesn’t, that marks me for the receipt of certain kinds of violence and the giving of others. A thing that I have to hide, press into a tight wire bra so the boys don’t stare, stuff with cotton so that it doesn’t leak, cover with oversized clothes if I want to feel right but it’s still not right. A pincushion for two-inch needles every week, a reservoir for thick fluid of hormone replacement. An obstacle.

“My body is…”

Being held. By this woman, this man, this circle of strangers, this ritual space. I reach into my chest to see if I have any coals I can breathe into embers. I do.

My body is… *desirable*?

She whispers into my ear: “All of you is welcome here.”

I realize my face is already hot with tears. I think I must’ve been crying since I laid down. The faces that circle past me are full of soft eyes, gentle smiles, the warmth of a generous witness. I let out more water.

“My body is the body of the Goddess!

My body is the body of the Goddess!”

I heave for the full hour, held by this stranger-but-not-a-stranger, a woman I immediately trusted the moment she identified herself as a sex worker. I knew that she traded in bodies. Held boundaries, held space for men (and women?) to receive pleasure without shame. Understood what it is to be marked as repulsive because of this ability, as an excess.

It meant that she could hold me too without shame. And she did. She offered me acceptance in her touch, permission in her words, and I cried because it felt so alien to me. Because it was a rescue ship in my rough watered sea of rejection. Something I didn’t feel it in the arms of my own lover. Something I wasn’t sure I had ever felt.

This offering, this witnessing broke open the dam of my body. I surrendered to its waves and offered my grief to the circle of soft eyes passing us gently by as they sang the final lines of the chant:

“Oh… I am that I am…

Oh… I am that I am…”

***

“[T]raumatic memory is often described as a wound: a painful mark of the past that haunts and overwhelms the present… -a violent latency of the past in which memory is imagined as a wounded body.”

- Antonio Traverso and Mick Broderick 2010, "Interrogating Trauma: Towards a critical trauma studies"[45]

Trauma is an interruption- a congealed synthesis of the pain of past experience that manifests in our bodies both physically and socially. It resonates in our muscles and disturbs our capacity to relationally function, to connect with ourselves and to others.[46] Because it is as social as it is individual, trauma often eludes us when it comes to the question of what to do about it- how to heal as individuals a wound that is relational.[47] The Healing Circle is a manifestation of the Reclaiming ritualists' respect for trauma as "…the analogical physicality of the traces left by the past in traumatic memory," as resting in the body, as both individual and social, and as warranting a form of relational address.[48] For this reason, I had been looking forward to the Healing Circle all week, and I was not disappointed. Within the borders of the circle I found a space where I could publicly designate my body as a site of traumatic memory and need for healing, and in doing so access a form of collective recognition and care that I had once thought impossible.

"Ritual performance has the capacity to make the impossible momentarily beyond question.''

- Barbara Myerhoff 1992, *Remembered lives: The work of ritual, storytelling, and growing older*[49]

[45] Traverso, Antonio and Mick Broderick 2010, "Interrogating Trauma: Towards a critical trauma studies," *Continuum*, 24:1, 2010, p.5
[46] Traverso and Broderick, 2010
[47] Franklin, Cynthia G. & Laura E. Lyons, "I Have a Family": Relational Witnessing and theEvidentiary Power of Grief in the Gwen Araujo Case," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 22:3, 2016, pp. 437-466
[48] Traverso and Broderick 2010, p.5
[49] Myerhoff, Barbara. *Remembered lives: The work of ritual, storytelling, and growing older*, The University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 1992

There's something palpable about a ritual. Ritual is the site at which "theatre and anthropology overlap,"[50] where culture is performed in such a way that the rituals' individual participants, as well as the social group itself, are markedly and materially changed afterwards. Ritualists rely on "giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be *no* society," and by relying on such a bond are able to generate a creative force that is "felt…to be more than human powers, though they are invoked and channeled by the representatives of the community."[51] When Reclaiming witches organize a healing ritual, they do so knowing that to facilitate us all in the collective act of "calling the circle," of defining the ritual space, we are collectively invoking a border into the liminal space of ritual potential,[52] where the seemingly impossible task of navigating and repairing trauma becomes, for the moment, tangible beyond question.

"Our becomings are intersubjective—contingent on mutual recognition: being seen and being moved by the other."

- Beatrice Allegranti and Jonathan Wyatt 2014, *Witnessing Loss*[53]

In witnessing, there is shedding and there is birth; in other words we are transformed because being witnessed allows us to make sense of the past in a way that we can bear to integrate into

[50] Turner, Victor. "Liminality and Communitas" 1969, in eds. Bial, Henry and Sara Brady, *The Performance Studies Reader Third Edition*, Routledge, NY, 2016, p.97
[51] Turner 1969, pp.99-104
[52] Turner 1969
[53] Allegranti, Beatrice and Jonathan Wyatt, "Witnessing Loss: A Feminist Material- Discursive Account," *Qualitative Inquiry* 20:4, 2014, p.537

the present.[54] The Healing Circle is a yearly Witchcamp tradition that ritualizes witnessing by creating an energetic container where strangers can offer to bear witness, to hold each other's grief and pain with the explicit intention that in doing so we can ease each others' burdens and foster healing. Reclaiming rituals are crafted around basic understandings shared across participants in Reclaiming philosophy and community; the witches who crafted the Healing Circle operate on the intuitive understanding that "…relational witnessing and testimony insist that one's humanity comes in large part from relationships with others,"[55] and as such that relationality contains a huge amount of energetic potential that can be ritualized in order to foster healing. And so I felt in my body the wisdom of Reclaiming's ritualized synthesis of intuited trauma theory with their respect for the healing power of communitas through witnessing, all held in the embodied enactment of the Reclaiming circle-casting spell:

"The circle is cast. We are between the worlds, and what we change between the worlds, changes all the worlds."

- Reclaiming Tradition circle spell

We toast the Red Dragon (and we honor life)

I adjust the long, red silk ribbon I had fashioned moments earlier around my bare chest as a makeshift harness. I am sitting amongst strangers and new friends on one of the long benches in

[54] Myerhoff 1986

[55] Franklin, Cynthia G. & Laura E. Lyons, "I Have a Family": Relational Witnessing and the Evidentiary Power of Grief in the Gwen Araujo Case," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22:3, 2016, p.438

the dining hall. Red garlands decorate the walls, and before us on the table are clear pitchers full of a red juice cocktail. An older queer man rises to introduce tonight's ritual meal.

"The Red Dragon Dinner is a tradition among Reclaiming witches, starting in the 80's and 90's as a way to raise awareness of the AIDS crisis and offer a ritual for grief and comfort to those of us affected by it. Reclaiming has lost many Beloveds to the crisis and so we continue this ritual as a way to honor their memory."[56]

It works like this: everyone is decked out in shades of red. We eat red foods and drink red drinks, and everywhere on the red-clothed tables are pictures of our Beloved Dead. We tell stories about the ones we lost to AIDS while we eat, an after each story someone who listened raises their glass and shouts:

"All hail the Red Dragon!"

And everyone in the hall stops mid-sentence to respond:

"All hail the Red Sacred Blood!"

As I listen, I trace the plastic frame in front of me with my fingers. In it is a photo of my uncle Donald, grinning through his big black moustache as he leans over the rail of a balcony. Not yet ash and bone chips, still full of his red sacred blood.

[56] This isn't word for word what he said, but the jist of what I remember.

The introduction ends and we are invited to gather our plates. When we return to the tables with our food a new friend kindly asks me: “And who’s this?”

There’s a summer that comes to mind, when we were living with my Nunna at her house and Donald was over a lot. She called him a “southern belle,” the way he invented an archive’s worth of country sayin’s about this that and the other, the way he loved his Mama, the way he laid out in the yard and “took up all the sun.”

“This is my Uncle Donald. He died of AIDS in 2004.”

It’s time to tell his story but my memories rearrange themselves in scraps of circles. Phrases, gestures, a photograph worn out for being looked at so long. How he used to sing to me, “Allie Rae, Allie Rae, supper’s on the table come home!” Or, once when he teased for defending my worn-out baby doll, repeating over and again my own words in sing-song “Don’t make fun of my baaaabyyyy.” Or how he could move his giant adam’s apple up and down upon request. Or the sound of the air whistling through his nose. But instead I say something that I’d only just learned weeks before:

“After he died, people came left and right to tell my Nunna the kind things he did without ever telling anybody. Like, he used to cut peoples hair when they got sick. He wasn’t afraid to touch them.”

“He did all those things without mentioning it to anyone. That was just how he was. Very humble.” Nunna had said, staring off towards the hill as she lifted her cigarette.

Once during that old summer I remember, he was holding me in his arms and I pretended to fall asleep. He knew I was faking it, and he and my mother teased me. “She’s not really asleep, is she?” But somehow I managed to keep my face soft, my body relaxed, resisting the giggles of my prank even as he admitted defeat: “Well, I’ll be. She is.” I must have actually fallen asleep shortly after, because that’s where my memory fades.

What I tell my small audience at the table is: “He was my Queer ancestor, it’s thanks to him that my family accepted me. When he came out, he already packed his bag incase he got thrown out. My Nanny just shrugged and said ‘we knew.’ After that they were always taking in his friends who got thrown out.” A rare Queer haven in the rural South in the 1960’s.

The picture of him that I brought was taken at the beach, likely by Nunna. She later told me it was from the same weekend when he admitted he had HIV. He died just as the medicines were advancing enough to make your blood count undetectable. He could’ve lived if he had just held on a little longer. But after watching so many of his friends die, and his lovers, she says “he just gave up. He started drugging again, and he stopped taking the medicine.” And that was that.

“He was magic, you know.” Nunna tells me this story so often I don’t remember the first time I heard it. “He could fly away in his dreams and remember it. Astral projection it’s called. And

once when he didn't like my boyfriend because he was abusive, oh he hated that man, Donald made dolls of us and every night moved them a little further apart. Sure enough, we broke up."

What I say to my audience at the table is: "I think he would've liked it here. He was a witch. He would've thought it was 'fabulous!'"

He went into hospice when I was in fifth grade, and my family went to go see him. I remember feeling such an air of expectancy and finality that I refused to go. That was the last time they saw him because he died shortly after, and for a long time I felt guilty about not saying goodbye. Until last summer, Nunna said how "he didn't want anyone to see him like that," that he hated the way he looked in that bed so skinny and pocked with ulcers. It's a relief to think- maybe my young self sensed that this wasn't the version of him I should see or remember. A refusal to witness. Instead I remember him in the summer, smelling like sun tan lotion and strong enough to hold me.

My friend next to me senses that I'm done telling Donald's story. They raise their glass and shout: "All hail the Red Dragon!"

Something else that Nunna says often is that in hospice, they would roll his bed outside so that he could still sunbathe. That, and: "He could see people in the room with him at the end. He talked to them and smiled like he was somewhere else. They showed him the way."

The dining hall settles into the briefest moment of silence before: “All hail the Red Sacred Blood!”

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"Re-membering" may be used, calling attention to the reaggregation of members, the figures who belong to one's life story, one's own prior selves, as well as significant others who are part of the story.”

- Barbara Myerhoff 1982, “Life History Among the Elderly: Performance, Visibility, and Re-Membering”[57]

Reclaiming’s Red Dragon Dinner is a collectively performed ritual thick with rhetorical significance. Our spell was cast in the act of mutually breathing life into our individual memories, in naming, mourning, celebrating, integrating the significance of our Beloved Dead to who we were when we knew them, to who we are now as individuals in community, and to how we can bear to synthesize it all. “Re-membering, then, is a purposive, significant unification, quite different from the passive, continuous fragmentary flickerings of images and feelings that accompany other activities in the normal flow of consciousness.”[58] In creating a space for collective re-membering, the Red Dragon Dinner offers us a “definitional ceremony,” a ritual ever so important to marginalized communities, where “again and again [we] attempted to show outsiders, as well as each other, who [we] were, why [we] mattered, what the nature of [our] past and present lives was.”[59] Within the ritualized space of the dining hall, dressed all in red, the weight of Donald’s story suddenly became an opportunity, a gift. Friends and strangers became

[57] Myerhoff, Barbara. “Life History Among the Elderly: Performance, Visibility, and Re-Membering,” in Ed. Jay Ruby, *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982, p.111
[58] Myerhoff 1982, p.11
[59] Myerhoff 1982, p.105

witnesses to and actors in the gentle drawing out of grief from my body, grief collectively aired and re-braided into a wholeness I could bear.

"Reckoning with reflexive and multiple losses, this form resists closure, insisting on repetition and extension to account for the mounting of past and pending losses."

- Dagmawi Woubshet 2015, *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in Early Era of AIDS*[60]

The Red Dragon Dinner adds to the thick repertoire of politicized, publicized and performed mourning rituals in the wake of AIDS, and as such it "confounds and traverses the limits of mourning" in ways that enacted, and still do enact, real change.[61] It was born in a moment in time when out of necessity, "disprized mourners placed public grief at the center of art and protest, insisting that lives could be saved through the very speech acts triggered by death."[62] It continues today as a recognition of the cross-generational resonance of that grief. The power of this ritual, and the driving force for its requisitely communal nature, is the Red Dragon Dinner's fluid synthesis of "…a poetics of compounding loss. These narratives of mourning do not recount, respond to, and reflect upon singular events of mourning, but instead explicitly underscore…the serial and repetitive nature of the losses they confront."[63] The constant conversational interruption of the call and response: "All hail the Red Dragon," and "All hail the Red Sacred Blood!" ceaselessly punctuates the space, an inventory of loss and love that refuses

[60] Woubshet, Dagwami 2015, *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in Early Era of AIDS*, Johns Hopkins University Press, MD, 2015, p.146
[61] Ibid. p.3
[62] Ibid. p.146
[63] Ibid. p.3

the neatness and closure of a simpler mourning ceremony because it recognizes that our loss is not just individual, but rather a "collective devastation in the lives of countless others like [us]."[64] I felt the power of such a move in my body. In its reframing of my own understanding of my grief- placing my familial and individual loss of love and mentorship as part of a collectively felt and continuously mourned Queer inventory, a collective salve for a collective wound that I alone haven't the power to navigate.

"In the invitation, a less prescribed, but nonetheless repetitive movement, the internal state of the lost, profane person is transformed into a found, sacred one."

- Miles Richardson 1990, "The Spatial Sense of the Sacred in Spanish America"[65]

HIV/AIDS marked the blood and bodies of our Beloved Dead as not only profane but contaminated. As pollution, contagion, "a danger to society, a vector of disease."[66] Their communities a public health risk to be managed, or better yet ignored, because in their diseased queerness they became the abject, that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules."[67] The violence against them redoubled in its silence, because "violence enacted against those who are already not quite lives, who are living in a state of suspension between life and death, leaves a mark that is no mark."[68] What, then, happens when we break silence with a toast to contaminated blood? What power exists in a "ritual: a tightly

[64] Ibid.
[65] Richardson, Miles. "The spatial sense of the sacred in Spanish America and the American South and its tie with performance," in R. Schechner & W. Appel (Eds.), *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual* (pp. 221-235). Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1990, p.228
[66] Nova, Cyd. "Vectors of Disease: Sex Workers as Bodies to Be Managed." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 3:3, 2016, p.199
[67] Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press: New York, 1982, p.4
[68] Butler 2004, p.25

organized, prescribed sequence of events whose outcome transforms a profane reality into a sacred one?"[69] The Red Dragon Dinner represents a performed, collective confrontation of "the blood that runs through all the veins of [our] lives,"[70] a space where through the affective weight of cooperative vulnerability, grief, intention and action we "transcend, break through the barriers of solitude"[71] towards a collective re-articulation of identity. In our spell we re-cast the identities of our individual Beloveds from a state of profane contagion to communal holiness, to the bearers of "Red Sacred Blood," resounding all around us from the peak of our chorus of voices, to the redness of our garments, to the blood-colored glasses we raise.

"And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master."

- Julia Kristeva 1982, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*[72]

Transformation through the ecstasy of grief

"We meet Hecate
Through the ecstasy of grief
Inside and outside of time."[73]

It's the first night of camp and the sound of drum beats rises through the trees as quickly as the sun sets, accelerating my heart beat. This quickens me and I rush to the circle from the empty

[69] Richardson 1990, p.224
[70] Atwood Mason, Michae.l "The Blood that Runs Through the Veins: the Creation of Identity and a Client's Experience of Cuban-American 'Santería Dilogún' Divination," *TDR* 37:2, 1993, p.115
[71] Richardson 1990, p.234
[72] Kristeva 1982, *p.*2
[73] California Witchcamp 2019 planning team

cabin while still attempting to look dignified. I am surrounded by strangers, gathered around an enormous fire for the opening ritual. I already know that we will be casting a circle to remain up for the week. But I don't know about the grief.

I notice with a mixture of pride and mild disappointment that I'm the only one starting with my tits out on the first night of many, in what eventually came to feel like a space outside of time as we collectively imagined and enacted community utopia for one whole week. It's colder than I'm used to for late June, but closer to the fire it's so warm my skin begs me to stay in motion, keeping the light of the flame from touching any one place for too long. I wonder if my nipples can get sunburnt from exposure to the fire (they did not).

Our circle lay near the center of a huge campsite in the Mendocino Woodlands of Northern California. Mendocino is a vast ancient forest populated by ferns and massive Redwood trees. Their broad, bare trunks branch out into a variegated canopy quite high up off the ground, creating the sensation below of being encapsulated within a space that is both open and contained. The ground is carpeted with layers upon layers of brown duff, handfuls of tiny twigs with even tinier leaf-spikes that when alive and piled together create the fluffy and swaying canopy above us. Now as the sun completes its setting, the many trunks recede into pregnant shadows, re-emerging gently as the fire's light flickers forward and back and forward again.

As the ritual opens, we are reminded of its intention: "We meet Hecate through the ecstasy of grief, Inside and outside of time." And then to initiate our communal grounding and centering, we are called to attention for the land acknowledgement. We stand still in the circle, eyes closed,

breathing deeply. The ritual leaders tell us the story of how we stand on the ancestral lands of the Pomo people, and how we are called to name and honor them as the rightful stewards of this place.[74] We are called to understand also that not far from this spot, the Pomo people experienced a massacre as settlers came in to steal the land and turn it into homesteads and a national park. That our being here is made possible through this violence.

We are led into a deep pause, drumbeats slowed, to sit with this knowledge. This memory of a specific battle layered over the memory of the more gradual violence of colonial displacement. It would do a triple violence to pretend this history didn't exist, especially as we are invited in the meditation of grounding and centering to send our spiritual roots down and down into the earth, to branch out and connect to the trees and each other. We cannot know the land without knowing her stories that precede and supersede us.[75] We are invited to hold them as a reason to engage in the transformative work of the Reclaiming tradition, the work of witchcraft for social justice.

From here our ritual leaders transition, inviting us to continue giving thanks to the land for holding us and our magic year after year. We are led to visualize the 20+ consecutive years of energy that has soaked into the ground from this exact spot around the fire. We are invited to let it hold us while we move through the ecstasy of grief as the ritual opens and deepens.

[74] "…Sherwood Valley Pomos [were] Onpotílnom, which means Ground Dust People. Place and place- names structured how California Indians told their histories as well as how they understood one's identity. Stories might begin with a place- name or refer to a specific location." Bauer, William J. *California Through Native Eyes: Reclaiming History*, University of Washington Press, WA, 2016, P.28

[75] Settler histories ignored Pomo historical interpretations. At the end of the story the youngest girl said, "We are the makers of trails, in our footsteps a civilization follows over our once silent paths. The traffic of a nation moves." Bauer 2016, p.32

Grief. My mind flickers, and I find it difficult to concentrate on the guided meditation. I peek through squinted eyes at the firelit faces around me, mostly all soft with closed eyes, mostly all white. My body is rigid, antsy. I am reeling, still stuck in the knowledge that below our pool of decades of soaked magic, this land also holds blood. She holds the grief of her original people.

I am not yet sure how this ritual, this week of camp, or the Reclaiming tradition itself can lead us to conjure transformation and social justice, let alone the reparation of colonial violence. So it gives me anxiety. I think of my radical, Queer, organizer friends and wonder whether they would feel comfortable in this circle. What would they think to see me here, participating, performing? I experience this as a tension, a palpable pressure that pushes me deeper inside myself, restricting my arms and legs as the drumming picks up in pace and the bodies around me begin to move. I remain frozen by a deep feeling of un-belonging. A gag reflex for my place in the timeline of this land. Embarrassment as though I were being watched and judged as a disappointment, an un-ally. Almost-disgust for myself and everyone around me. And then the voice of the ritual leader pushes through to urge me forward:

"Step to the edge of your cauldron of grief and look inside. Sit in your fear and discomfort, feel through it. Know that you can and must confront it."

The stewards circle slowly throughout the crowd, speaking in phrases both rhythmic and daring. The ritual looks like this: there are three psychopomps, or ritual participants who in a state of trance offer themselves as collective vessels of grief and facilitators of communication with the otherworld. They lay on tables around the fire with their faces shrouded, and we are invited to

approach them and whisper the things that stick to the insides of our hearts, or else stand by and mourn what we can't speak. Keeping in rhythm with the drums are the collective voices of the crowd in repetitive song, as they catch on and join in periodically, led of course by the ritual's stewards and musicians. My voice remains caught in my throat, my focus still somewhere between that deep anxiety and the movement of the bodies around me, their voices rising:

"Breath by breath
There is life there is death"

The drums beat. The crowd moves. I draw back from the center of the circle, deciding it better to observe in this moment. This is better, I think, I'm here as a scholar after all. I let my eyes follow the stewards, wander over the crowd and linger on the psychopomps who in the firelight look eerily like the dead at a wake.

"What are you holding beneath the surface?" The stewards urge. "Hecate is the mother of shadows; she urges us to greet that which we would keep hidden! We can't know our true power if we don't integrate the face we show to the outside world with the one that hides in the shadows. If we remain afraid of our pain, grief and shame, of our wildness. There is power in the shadows. What do you grieve?"

I have plenty to grieve and I know it. A cauldron beating behind my exposed chest, its contents bubbling over but staying stuck in my body. I force my feet to tap gently to the drums, but I only

shuffle. I'm still stuck. This isn't what I'd hoped for. I'd hoped to dance. The song increases in pace again.

"She is rising"

We were supposed to leap into the cauldrons of our own shame, to enter the liminal by facing what shifts beneath the surfaces of politeness and our everyday masks. They want us to become wild with grief, to give ourselves over. But I feel awkward. Too big for my skin. Stuck in the thick shame and guilt of being part of a sea of largely white faces shuffling to the sounds of drums on stolen land.

"She is here,
She is everywhere"

The movements around me increase in speed. People begin to approach the psychopomps, kneeling by their heads and speaking into their ears, or holding their feet, or standing a pace away and sobbing. The fire's shadows lengthen as the very last light of the sun finally disappears for good. The music quickens, and all around the circle hands pull at hair, faces are buried in palms.

"What can't you grieve?" The stewards urge. "What are you holding back? What never sees the light of day?" A repeated invitation. An initiation- dive into the cauldron of grief. A big, bald man crouches on the ground, rocking and holding himself, crying, screaming into the fire.

“She is arising.”

In the face of their pain I feel myself shift from observer to witness, trying to hold it all in my view, limited by the haze of my peripheral vision. A fog of affect so thick it bubbles in the heat of the fire, it resists the motion of my fingers as I reach them up to hold my elbows. A wave of chills rushes slowly up and back down. I can’t look away.

“Breath by breath,
There is life there is death,
She is rising.”

I can’t. I’ll be crushed under the weight. More importantly, I feel like a hypocrite. But then, coming to this place, remaining distant, is that not also hypocritical? I came here seeking a pathway to the reparative. A way to feed my soul and walk the talk of anti-racism, decolonial activism, and magic at the same time. A dam, cracking under the pressure. A choice in the form of a wall I’ve yet to break. My chest tightens in the effort to contain a flurry of heartbeats. A flash of images from face to face, body to crumpled and quaking body, afloat in the thick fog of drum beats, sobs, and the low slow flow of a steward’s voice: “Let it move you, let it transform you. Let it initiate you into Hecate’s army, to fight for social justice! To choose the harder path.” And the singing continues.

“She is here,

She is everywhere,

She is arising."

Finally a scream arises anonymously from the crowd, deep, grainy, palpable, initiating another chorus of howls and heaves. I return to my body to find that it is my own. I am on my knees in the dirt, and as my eyes roll up they are caught in the fire where a face glows, floating in shadow, twisted and ugly with grief.

***

"One does not always stay intact…despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel."

- Butler 2004, *Precarious Life*[76]

In the ecstasy of grief, in the cloud of affect produced by the sight, the feel, the faces of those around me who had already cracked open, I became undone. The profoundness of this initiation for me was underscored by both its communal nature and the explicitness of its purpose in transforming us into agents for social change, empowered by our ritualized connection to the vitality of our humanness that lives beneath the masks of civility we all wear, however differently. The force of it pulled me out of the immobilizing performance anxiety and guilt of confronting my own position as a white settler, an immobilization that so often malforms antiracist efforts into a selfish fixation on the alleviation of guilt and dissociation from the guilty.[77] "The self exposed is incongruous with itself. It is seen as who it is not supposed to be. It

[76] Butler 2004, p.19

[77] Alcoff, Lina Martín "An Analytic of Whiteness," *The Future of Whiteness,* 2015

feels what it is not supposed to feel..."[78] The first ritual on the first night of camp elicited such exposure; for me, the cauldron I was carrying- and ultimately intending to confront- by being there was the implications of my whiteness in how I navigate my own spirituality and desires for participation in decolonial reparation. What I hadn't expected was the physical nature of white shame's restriction on my ability to move forward- nor the potential of embodied, ecstatic ritual in breaking me through to a wild, renewed state of potential and action.

"In ritual drama, we show ourselves to ourselves . . .not only as we are, but as we might yet become."

- Barbara Myerhoff 1986, "Life not death in Venice: Its second life"[79]

Community-based rituals are spaces of great potential for the transformation of consciousness, felt as "...a multidimensional alteration of the ordinary state of mind, overcoming barriers between thought, action, knowledge, and emotion. The invisible world referred to in ritual is made manifest and the subject placed within it."[80] In this case, our "invisible worlds" were given space to manifest privately as each individual navigated their ghosts within a public ritual container, prompted by a guided meditation leading us through the processes of shame, grief, and repression that we internalize as the results of external pressures, social expectations, and oppressive systems. Navigating through this became a physically and socially supported act within the ritual, where in doing so "we [were] performing an act of imagination, one that has the

[78] Thandeka. *Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America*, The Continuum Publishing Company: NY, 1999, pp.12-13

[79] Myerhoff, Barbara. "Life not death in Venice: Its second life," in Eds. V. Turner and E.M. Bruner, *The anthropology of experience*. University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, 1986

[80] Meyerhoff 1990, p.246

possibility of transforming what ‘‘is’’ into ‘‘what yet could be’.”[81] As far as the state of what *could be*, we would continue to collectively imagine throughout the week that followed, building off of the core tenant of politicized commitment to social transformation.

> “Yet, this joining cannot be too easy, too open, too settled. Solidarity is an uneasy, reserved, and unsettled matter that neither reconciles present grievances nor forecloses future conflict.”
>
> - Eve Tuck and K. Yang 2001, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor[82]

For myself and many others at camp, what defines social transformation is racial justice grounded in an ethic of decolonization, in the form of reparations and the return of Indigenous sovereignty over stolen land.[83] For example, this is the motivation for Reclaiming’s commitment in recent years to opening all CAWC ceremonies with a land acknowledgement, for burgeoning dialogues on appropriation, and the provision of space to work through the toxic manifestations of whiteness within the offerings of camp. However, this work is both uneasy and incomplete. That same tension, the one so thick it restricted my movements, that required the social support of a ritual container for me learn how to move through it, remains present for me as an individual and as a member of the Reclaiming community. And vitally so. I understand this anxiety to be an embodied acknowledgement of the incommensurability of my desires to be part of a social-justice oriented magical community, while engaging in nature-based magical practices on stolen land. This tension is healthy, because it drives me to ask, to what degree do our ceremonies function as “’*moves to innocence,’* which problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and

[81] Myerhoff 1982
[82] Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang. “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” *Decolonization:Indigeneity, Education, & Society* 1:1, 2012, p.3
[83] Ibid.

complicity, and rescue settler futurity?"[84] To what degree can I concretely say our magic for social justice actually benefits the Pomo people, and by extension the greater Native communities of Northern California, whose earth and roots and water we call upon for ceremony? These questions drive me into an uncertain future, where I will continue unraveling and re-weaving my relationship to this practice until I can finally say that I am satisfied because my magical work actively supports Native futures. And I recognize this to be a living process which can never truly be finished.

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"In that liminal, trance-like moment of communitas, something new is being made possible. Something poignantly hopeful is happening, and all who are engaged are changed."

- Barbara Meyerhoff 1992, *Remembered lives: The work of ritual, storytelling, and growing older*[85]

When a circle is cast in Reclaiming rituals, the leaders always say: "We are between the worlds, and what we change between the worlds, changes all the worlds." The circle creates a physical and spiritual space in which "it is as if the usual boundaries momentarily melt,"[86] the social laws that distinguish and separate us from one another in both body and experience become soft and permeable. This experience of collectiveness, a communitas of care and spiritual mutual aid,[87] is so contrary to what most of us are used to in the social structures that define our lives, that it becomes doubly potent in facilitating a transformation of consciousness. Somewhere between holding each other and accepting being held, our internal processes no longer feel so heavy, and

[84] Ibid. p.3
[85] Meyerhoff 1992
[86] Meyerhoff 1992
[87] Davis 2000, 118

the possibility of creating a communal future that is equitable and nourishing feels so much more palpable.

"…it is that liminal space between witnessing and coming to terms with that witnessing which is fertile ground for the growth of feminist consciousness."

- Natasha Behl, Michelle Téllez, Michael Stancliff, Montye Fuse 2018, "Writing the Intersection: Feminist Autoethnography as Narrative Collaboration"[88]

My intention in this first chapter is to show you the moments that cemented for me the transformative potential within Neopagan community ritual, for both personal and collective healing and for enacting radically imagined futurities that exceed the confines of hegemonic social structures. I still don't know the answer to the questions I came here with, as a Pagan witch and as a scholar: how do we as settler Pagans reconcile our desire to know and honor the spirits of the land with the fact of our place in the timeline of colonization? With our lack of relationship to the people who know their proper names, their proper ceremonies? With the trauma-memory of blood in the very soil? While I still do not have satisfactory answers to these questions, I do have a sense of the path to forging them. As I have hoped to demonstrate, the space of Pagan ritual and community enactment holds the potential for movement from witnessing to feeling to transformation, though not necessarily in such a linear order. I wholly believe that within the collective transformation manifested by Pagan rituals is a vast potential for the growth of a radically liberating and deeply flexible consciousness, one that can hold the

[88] Behl Natasha, Michelle Téllez, Michael Stancliff, Montye Fuse, "Writing the Intersection: Feminist Autoethnography as Narrative Collaboration," *Journal of Narrative Politics* 5:1, 2018, p. 43

tension of our need to imagine a liberated future for ourselves that also prioritizes the return of Indigenous sovereignty over the lands where we live and practice. It is for this reason, this potential that I experienced with my very body, that I remain committed to Pagan witch spiritual community despite its deep contradictions and challenges that I will hold in the following chapters.

"The Native futures, the lives to be lived once the settler nation is gone- these are the unwritten possibilities made possible by an ethic of incommensurability."

- Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang 2012, "Decolonization is not a metaphor"[89]

In the chapters that follow I commit to an ethic of incommensurability as my compass, which I understand to mean always staring into the cauldron of grief, always remaining transparent in how I question the contradictory mission of finding a liberating spirituality as a settler witch. I remain enthusiastically committed to exploring how moving through the grief of this contradiction can open us up to the possibility of conceiving of this moment, of our connection with this land, as part of a timeline, a story that once again sees a Native futurity.

[89] Tuck and Yang 2012, p.36

III

Encountering Theory

In the following chapter I give a linear account of the developing relationship between the stories of my past that led me to seek out graduate education, and the scholarly theory I read during the first year of my program. In preparing to write this, I referred back to old essays, journals and syllabi so as to remain as true as possible to the sources I had access to and the mindset I was in at the time, in the hopes that in doing so I can reveal the gradual process of story/theory integration into my practices as both a witch and a scholar. This temporal orientation includes the afterwards of each story, where I break with the narrative in order to more explicitly place it in conversation with scholarly work. Because writing this prompted me to reflect on how the stories that shaped me are rooted in my time as an organizer in a Queer, inter-racial, Black and Brown-led movement for social justice in North Carolina, I understand that it is imperative that I name and credit these folks and these spaces for teaching me the majority of my analytical commitments. However, my place in organizing community was never as a scholar or writer but simply as a community member, and so it feels neither authentic nor ethical to call specific people by name or to get too deep into the dynamics of our personal relationships. The stories I choose to share are moments that formed my political and scholarly commitments, and they are underwritten by deeper layers of intimacy, violence and even death than I am willing to expose. I know these things happened to me, pushed me to grow, deeply wounded me and shaped who I am to a serious degree. But I also know I need to be accountable to my limitations as a white scholar, in that I owe my motivation and knowledge to my participation in a Black-led movement against police brutality and the murder of Black people. I long to honor this genesis, and I am reticent to give a more detailed account of the things my friends and I witnessed and

did in reaction to them, or specifics about the people I was close to during the uprising and my years as an organizer. This is not only because many of these were private and personal interactions but also because I want to protect both the safety and dignity of my community members. After all, I was warned many times by them how white politicians, reporters, and even scholars greedily lap up trauma porn, sensationalizing accounts of Black pain at the expense of their communities and movements. Instead of doing this, I attempt to be transparent about the process of integrating my own experiences with Black and Indigenous leadership and shared struggle, into how I embody my political commitments in my scholarship, spiritual practices, and life. I consider this transparency to be paramount to my accountability.

Seeds and Roots

It's orientation day, and the circle is going around where everyone speaks to their research interests. My heart is racing as it inches closer to my turn, my mind blank and fumbling over what I will say mixed with awe at the coherent biographies emerging around the room. Queer rhetoric, performance and culture, race and gentrification, etc. It comes to my turn, and as usual in the spotlight I speak off the top of my head in a blind panic. Something about the rhetoric of race and social movements, and activist communities. It's a blur, but I think I sounded smart, and it's the next person's turn. My pulse begins to slow.

Saying that I want to study the rhetoric of race and activist communities feels tense, laden with stories I can't clarify in this short moment. It makes me anxious because I don't want to be presumptuous, and I don't want to take credit or assume expertise seeing as how I'm white, in a

predominantly white department in a predominantly white school. Especially when the story of how I got to this moment is peopled with Black and Brown trans people and femmes, and some white queer activists as well, whose labor and leadership uncovered my eyes and ignited my heart with a hunger for social justice. It's a cooperative thing, arriving here, but I distill it into an individualized research interest for the sake of introductions.

My mind flashes to my friends back home who taught me who to read, what to chant in the street, how to hold my head high and speak up, how to cooperatively build something we can use to help ourselves. To the first time I saw her, facing the crowd with a megaphone as we gathered on the courthouse steps and she sang to us the call and response "What side are you on my people, what side are you on?" and we answered, "We on the freedom side!" Later that night when she commanded us to lock arms and take the street, our line was unbreakable. And to the first person who told me what nonbinary is and the delicious relief I felt years later walking into a room full of trans people, who charged the very air with unconditional acceptance and even celebration for the ways we *all* fit into our bodies, a feeling I'll never forget and always long for. And to the dance parties, living rooms laden with sweating bodies and heart-stopping looks, and how my hair stood up when the crowd parted to reveal my friend vogueing to the beat, gracefully weaving a joyful chorus of "Ayyy!" from the crowd with the motion of their limbs like some kind of somatic magician. And to the shelves of books, Audrey Lorde, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Octavia Butler, George Yancey and Fred Moten, whom we referenced in hours-long conversations that circled around the room with the blunt as we questioned everything we learned growing up, and as we dreamed a future where we could all be together, communal, provided for, liberated.

There's pain here too, in thinking of what I left behind in North Carolina. My mind flashes to the time I was held accountable for sitting in shocked silence instead of defending my two Black femme friends while they held their own against a committee of racist white men, who banged the table and shook their fingers and yelled at them. Their pain in that moment of being abandoned by their white allies who'd explicitly come to back them up, and days later the pain in the meeting room as each member of the Collective spilled out stories of moments of racial violence and empty allyship, triggered by my failure to show up, my repetition of the injury, and aired with the intention of accountability and restoration. My silence repeated again as I became too saturated to respond with anything more than I'm sorry, and I will *never* do that again. And I flash to how my vibrant, inspiring, "revolutionary love-love-love!" organizing community was pulled apart by the aftermath of an insurrection, of direct and sustained bodily confrontation with extreme police violence during the first month of the 2016 Charlotte Uprising, the unsustainable strain pulling apart the frayed threads of group dynamics and interpersonal conflict. To the string of bridges I had a hand in burning, and the burning of mace on my eyes, mouth, and arms for hours. To when my friend and I were laying around in my bed and we saw them on the live news, jumping with the crowd on top of a cop car and screaming "Fuck the Police!" and we knew we had to go, if not to protect them then at least to fight with them. So we packed the car with water bottles and a first aid kit and flew up the interstate to Charlotte. And to the terror of being pressed into a corner with a handful of other people as a menacing wall of gas steadily billowed towards us. And to the following two years I spent frozen in time and licking my wounds, a consequence of five days, then ten days, then days I can't count of our bodies as shields and weapons against militarized police and the actual U.S. military, followed by months

of communal crisis and burnout, now myself withdrawn and staying the fuck away from anything to do with social justice organizing.

Too many stories flash before me, interwoven, too tangled to smooth out in the space of two years let alone two minutes of an explanation of why I'm here at this graduate orientation and what I care about enough to dedicate myself to studying it. The joys, the ways I was held deeper than ever before, how I was seen and affirmed and encouraged to step into the fullness of myself, how love multiplies exponentially when we hold it as a community and the way I ached so badly for the fruition of our visions of mutual aid and Queer land projects, braided in with the pain of the hurts I caused, the ways I was hurt, and the crushing weight of communal aguish triggered by the ceaseless onslaught of violent institutions. I still can't make sense of the many feelings braided in, and the reactions my body has to them. I only know that I feel a pulse, an anxiety behind and inside me that drives me forward. Away from this stuck place, this bedroom where I collapsed when I got home from Charlotte and didn't leave for months, this collapse of my mental health and ability to hold a job, this collapse of the community I thought I had and the friendships that frayed under the strain of trauma. The sticky nothingness of failure. So I applied for programs, out of city, out of state, to get me out of there. To a place where I can be paid the poverty wages I'm used to but with the privilege of my work being intellectual, a space where I can be supported by a department to slowly unpack my experiences and… make something good come of them?

I came here to this school filled with memories, and what they all mean to me I don't yet understand but what is clear are the convictions that emerge from them, hard-learned and hard-

taught by a quilt of faces, bodies, experiences, relationships. From them I know that I have to always be transparent and cite my sources, to give credit to and trust Black femmes and trans people. To be critical of my words or lack thereof; to question power and to know the power of narratives and whose I choose to believe. If I'm being honest, I'm also here because studying rhetoric gives me a feeling of control, an intellectualized way to unpack and reconcile the pain my body still remembers. This is a privilege I justify by committing to an investment in the material edge of rhetoric, in how words ultimately *do* things. How my words, our words, the words of politicians, reporters, cops, and activists all effect movement in the realm of material bodies. And not just words, but the stories they weave- cultural narratives that circulate around us from the moment we're born to give us scripts for how to act in certain situations and towards certain people. And because I feel such a loss of control of the external scripts and words that define the potentials and limits of my life, loss of control in a sense of having failed as an activist when my mental health imploded, loss of control against the overwhelming braid of emotions and traumas, I think that surely the most direct thing I can do is to learn the code. And intellectualizing is a skill I already have. So then, how *exactly*, do people write narratives, spin stories, and wield power? And then how can knowing this generate creative responses and strategies? I long to find safety in these questions. And redemption.

But of course, there's no room for that in the spotlight of a succinct introduction of myself as a would-be scholar. I freeze like a deer in headlights, choking on my anxieties and failure. On complacency in the form of my own collapse and burnout, how my loss of direction finally led me to applying for this program as a way out, a place to go rest and process. Urged by the anxious tension between my genuine desire to make a world that protects and supports the

people I love, where we never have to rise up like that again, versus the drive to perfectly perform my allyship for all the world to see and in so doing relieve myself of the guilt of my own whiteness, a tension which I notice feels amplified in the official academic space of this graduate orientation. But, as a reconciliation of my failure I've made a commitment to being authentic and transparent to the best of my ability, so I say: I am here to study the rhetorics of race and social justice movements and activist communities. Read: I am here to retreat into the academic, and to think.

As the semester rolls out I become more acclimated to graduate school, though I'm always stumbling over the secret rules and scholar networks I didn't know were a thing, and chafing against the expectations of professionalism. Not to mention the impossible workload and the subsequent need to develop the new skill of selective skimming. I rely on the kindness of my professors and on the majority of my peers whose parents have master's degrees to teach me the way. For example, I learn that no one can physically read all that is required in every course- instead you have to read just enough to sound smart during a conversation in class. So, you focus on the authors that speak to you the most.

Something happens in spurts when I read. Red-hot, a rush of excitement in my chest when an author makes a call to the field, challenges and demands better from white academics and for BIPOC scholars. When Lisa Flores says, rhetorical scholars MUST attend to race, "For if there is something about race, that something is rhetorical."[90] And not in a tokenizing, "area studies" way, but rather if we "…are to attend to matters of discourse, whether understood as questions of

[90] Flores, Lisa A. "Between abundance and marginalization: the imperative of racial rhetorical criticism," *Review of Communication*, 16:1, 2016, p.8

impact, influence, or circulation, or questions of argument and audience, or questions of affect and materiality, we cannot ignore race…" because "rhetorical meanings, as they circulate on and around bodies, are already raced. Bodies that speak and listen, that exhort and cajole, that desire and hate are already raced."[91] What's more, she starts her argument by acknowledging that this imperative is not new, and Black scholars *have been* saying this, and not just saying but *doing* the work of transforming the academy into a space of activism for racial justice. Scholars like Olga Davis, who links the resiliency and transformative power of Black woman scholars all the way back to the "kitchen legacy" of enslaved African women, who through creative resistance transformed the kitchen from a space of relegation to a site of radical community and identity production, where "Black women cultivated a moral discourse, provided a grand respect for life, and affirmed their humanity by transcending hatred through the service of food," a legacy that Black women intellectuals embody today when they "…use their kitchen legacy to negotiate the white-dominated space of the academy[.] They redefine their importance in the domain of whiteness, they transform students and faculty alike, and they define and inform experience through provocative scholarship." [92] And Davis wrote this essay twenty years ago! It's past time EVERYONE listened and engaged, from our syllabi to our citations to the essays we write, it's past time we honored the gift of Black scholarship. I flash to the slogan *trust Black femmes* painted on cardboard. And then, *white silence is violence*. I'm energized, urged by Flores's and Davis' modeling of how to be direct, how to counteract silence in the space of scholarship, how to uplift and center transformative voices from the margins.

[91] Flores 2016, p.7
[92] Davis, Olga. "In the Kitchen: Transforming the academy through safe spaces of resistance," *Western Journal of Communication*, 63:3, 1999, p.369

Something happens when I read Langford and Speight. A halo lighting up the image of my friends standing on benches with megaphones speaking to a crowd of students, to the snapshots I cherish of them leading the crowd down Spring Garden street, to the way we locked arms to claim the intersection so they could chant and dance and bring Black joy to the center of the circle, the fruit of a small group or five or six of us who spent two days planning the solidarity action. Langford and Speight speak to this rhetorical space-making brilliance of Black-led grassroots movements, as embodied by the sweeping hashtag #BlackLivesMatter which creates new epistemological space (pathways to knowing) "By rejecting a negative or disregarded identity, as well as by bringing attention to the violence, harassment, and discrimination perpetuated against Black Americans, #BlackLivesMatter creates space for new Black identities to be constructed."[93] I marvel at how this essay asserts their brilliance and demands that scholars uplift them! At how Black activists simultaneously reveal disparity, re-script Black bodies as a positive presence, make newsworthy the event of violence against Black people, and call out and counteract white privilege all at the same time! And all without the certification of a PhD, instead writing essays with their bodies and slogans and actions, citing their own and each others' experiences as an organic repertoire validated by each other out of necessity. I'm humbled. I drink in the honor it is to have been in such proximity to Black movement-making brilliance, to have learned directly from my friends through our shared struggle and my constant witnessing of their ways of weaving space for each other and even for me, in my trans fullness. I think, this is a gift and I am lucky. And this is something I cannot forget to honor.

[93] Langford, Catherine and Montené Speight, "#BlackLivesMatter: Epistemic Positioning, Challenges, and Possibilities," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric,* Vol. 5, No.3/4, 2015, p.88

Something happens when I read George Yancey, in his Foucauldian reading of whiteness. A visual map of the neuron-like network of power and knowledge, of the organism of the capitalist state pulsing and pushing out the blueprints for the sorting of bodies along lines of power. A scouter that sniffs out the nexes, the nodes of intersection between the ideological and the material, "how whiteness, as a power/knowledge nexus, is able to produce new forms of knowledge (in this case 'knowledge' about Black people) that are productive of new forms of 'subjects,'"[94] and how, as a power bloc, whiteness is able to twist epistemological control into oppression on the social and individual levels, forming a living system that maintains and grows itself by reproducing the same conditions that create white people and Black people along binary lines of assumed worth. He frames whiteness as "not a given, but a kind of emergence," which "emerges as a value code deployed by a certain raciated (white) group of people that delimits and structures what it deems intelligible, valuable, normal, abnormal, superior, inferior, beautiful, ugly, and so on" at the same time that it "attempts to transcend differences…" thus "Constituting itself as the site of universality and absolute presence…function[ing] as an epistemological and ontological anchorage." In doing so, "whiteness creates a binary relationship of self-Other, subject-object, dominator-dominated, center-margin, universal-particular," and finally "conceals its status as raciated, located, and positioned."[95] This speaks to the insidiousness of racism, to its depths which elicited the calls from my movement leaders on behalf of other BIPOC to heal from and unlearn internalized oppression, and for the whites who want to be anti-racist, the call to dismantle whiteness and racism on an internal level. This is why they always said, we must understand this as a living process, not just something we can choose to disengage with, because

[94] Yancy, George, "A Foucauldian (Genealogical) Reading of Whiteness: The Production of the Black Body/ Self and the Racial Pathology of Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye." *Radical Philosophy Review*, 4:1, 2001, p.2
[95] Yancey 2001, p.3

we are made in it, we breathe it, and it trains us to reproduce it. The hope in this, as Yancey says is that, surely, "Having evaluated the code of whiteness in this way, and thereby, having revealed its partiality and concrete historicity, does this not create a space for overcoming whiteness?"[96] I feel armed, I have the intricately written code of function to the bio-political network of whiteness, and I feel oddly comforted recognizing that I am a being produced in a network, that this is not my fault, and I can do something about it.

Something happens when I read Anzaldúa. My heart breaks forward out of my chest and back again, twisting and turning and pulsing as she writes life in lines on pages that make me feel as naked as ribs cracked open. She says, "Writing produces anxiety. Looking inside myself and my experience, looking at my conflicts, engenders anxiety in me."[97] Anzaldúa's process, her spiritual coaxing of musa bruja*,* the witch muse intimately untangles and rebraids her experiences as a Chicana, a queer woman, a brown woman in a white country and white academy that endlessly seeks to rip out her tongue. Like the creativity of her people, who create 6, 7, 8 languages in response to existing in la frontera, the state of the borderland, she weaves herself an opportunity, a spiritual crafting of cuentos, stories that populate her writing and her life with acts of healing. This is not a choice for her but a need, a psychic unrest that nestles like a "cactus needle embedded in the flesh. It worries itself deeper and deeper" until she can do no less than stare it in the face, wrench out the splinter with the light of urgent necessity and brave vulnerability because "The painful periods I suffer from are symptomatic of a larger creative process: cultural shifts. The stress of living with cultural ambiguity both compels me to write and

[96] Yancey 2001, p.6
[97] Anzaldúa, Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999, p.72

blocks me."[98] The palpability of her in-betweenness, a state of being created by layers of colonial possibilities on cultural resilience and creativity on American racism and xenophobia on personal resistance and prayer, drives her to surrender to the spiritual exorcism aided by her diosas and her pen. The word in rhetorical studies for her method is autoethnography, but it feels more like a birthing, a transmutation of herself and her process on the page that my body greedily drinks and I just think… wow. This is scholarship, this is writing from the body, this is story-theory, this exposes scholarly "objectivity" as shallow and cruel, and this is what I have to do.

Now here I am. The end of my first semester and I have before me the models of the kind of rhetorical analysis I want to do- one that is unafraid to look right at the things that make me uncomfortable, to blatantly engage and challenge others to do the same, to uplift Black and Brown stories and scholarship, to intervene in the bio-political reproduction of whiteness, and to do all of this with a critically honest and storied relationship between my own experiences and the theory I engage with. But what a task. It overwhelms me. When I try to plan on how I might do this I feel stuck- full to the brim of the brilliant knowingness of these words of these scholars, but with an automatic disbelief in my ability to contribute meaningfully to the conversation. What could I, a white student whose knowledge comes in huge part from my extensive witnessing of Black brilliance, and relationship with queer BIPOC movement leadership and scholarship, possibly generate that's new and valuable? How can I engage with Davis or Langford and Speight or Anzaldúa without having to twist their work into a whitewashed husk where I can fit? And would doing so not be a perversion, yet another white scholar centering whiteness? And then, is being frozen in these questions itself not an exercise in the uselessness

[98] Anzaldúa 1999, p.74

of white guilt? And I have to write something, that's how grad school works. So I write a paper on the Foucauldian technologies of whiteness and a discourse analysis of my family's Appalachian English, and none of it is enough.

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"To what extent do our scholarly practices legitimize the hegemony of wester power structures?"

- Raka Shome 2016, "Postcolonial Interventions in the Rhetorical Canon: An 'Other' View"[99]

There is a reason why allyship feels awkward at best in the space of the academy. A reason why I condensed years of personal and collective struggle into an individualized research agenda, poetically worded with the hope of impressing my peers and professors. And it's the same reason why the skills and networks that open the doors of the academy and elevate the status of an individual within its walls resonates so deeply with the privileges of socioeconomic status and parents with master's degrees: whiteness permeates the university from roots to fruits, because it precedes and "prefigures the power bases of academic institutions."[100] Of course I am not the only person who chose the field of rhetoric in particular because of its potential for processing violence I've witnessed and experienced, and to disentangle the nuances in the ways that race, identity, and language all weave together. I was attracted to how rhetorical scholars spend a lot of time considering the ethics of what exactly their job should be, which began "during the late-1980's 'canon wars,' focusing on Eurocentric, male-authored texts, largely in the humanities," and evolved in the field of communication into decades of intermittent conversations around the

[99] Shome, Raka "Postcolonial Interventions in the Rhetorical Canon: An 'Other' View." In eds. Porrovecchio, Mark and Celeste Michelle Condit, *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: a Reader*, The Guildford Press, NY, 2016, p.561

[100] Nakayama, Thomas and Robert L. Krizek. "Whiteness: a Strategic Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 81, 1995, p.304

role of the critic, what constitutes a worthy object, and the ethics of studying marginalized voices, culminating in a recent explosion of BIPOC-scholar-led work around how discursive rhetorical strategies function to reproduce the dynamics of power incumbent in racialized violence.[101] However, despite this blossoming of brilliant work that uplifts BIPOC strategies for resistance and existence, and their repeated calls to contend with the realities of whiteness in the academy, "…it is surprising that critical scholars have not yet scrutinized the center in the ways that they have been probing the margins."[102] Despite its recent promise, "Rhetoric as a discipline that is largely based on humanist theories and speeches of white men in power has not been adequately self-reflexive about its scholarship in relation to issues of race and neocolonialism…the discipline as a whole has been disturbingly silent about its own disciplinary position in relation to issues of race and neocolonialism."[103] This silence illuminates the impact of the strategic rhetorical paradox of whiteness, in that "it affects the everyday fabric of our lives but resists, sometimes violently, any extensive characterization that would allow for the mapping of its contours. It wields power but yet endures as a largely unarticulated position."[104] Because of this, "there is little room for maneuvering out of the power relations imbedded in whiteness. Whiteness, stated or unstated, in any of its various forms, leaves one invoking the historically constituted and systematically exercised power relations. This creates an enormous problem for those in the center who do not want to reinforce the hegemonic position of the center…"[105] This explains the silence of the field, and the ineptness of white scholars like myself who want to contribute to the conversation in a meaningful way- it's not sexy to expose the contours of

[101] Shome 2016
[102] Nakayama, Thomas and Robert L. Krizek. "Whiteness: a Strategic Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 81, 1995, p.294
[103] Shome 2016, p.563
[104] Nakayama and Krizek 1995, p.291
[105] Nakayama and Krizek 1995, p.302

whiteness, and it's not easy because its emergence is so intertwined with the fabric of our opportunities, our interests, our very research paradigms, and our personhoods. So what can I do, in this moment, in this work to resist reproducing the strategic rhetoric of whiteness? And to be explicit about its place in my scholarship?

"We must listen for the fullness embedded in the silences and gaps, the moments of existence before the name or the category came to do its work upon the body. We must be more attuned to the present absences which calls for a Trans* method."

- Kai Green 2016, "Troubling the Waters: Mobilizing a Trans* analytic"[106]

In the corners of graduate school, the walks to and from my apartment and the reading and writing in those first months hundreds of miles away from home, I flash through memories of witnessing, relationship and action. Trying to, uncomfortably, respectfully, embody what I've learned from witnessing the work of my trans BIPOC movement leaders and friends. Reflecting on how they'd embodied a Trans* methodology, "an act of artfulness, an act of creation and possibility, or…the ability 'to mobilize across the contradictions, divisions, and containment strategies produced by the state and other such large-scale organizations of power that work to limit our capacity to align ourselves across differences in ways that are necessary for social transformation.'"[107] A methodology that because its intrinsically Black and Queer, speaks to and from the margins of both the movements for LGBTQ rights and Racial justice, and as such has the wisdom and foresight to "show us how people become representable as things, categories,

[106] Green, Kai. "Troubling the Waters: Mobilizing a Trans* analytic," in ed. Johnson, Patrick, *No Tea No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies,* Duke University Press 2016, p.80

[107] Green 2016 with a quote from Treva Ellison, pp.66-67

and names because it shows us the excess as a perpetual challenge to containment."[108] That challenge to containment and repression, that manifestation of expansive spaces of celebration big enough to hold *all* of us. A spark of resistance fueled by love and rage inside my friends who were just as young and inexperienced as me at organizing, just as fresh in the task of building the liberated community we wanted to see, but who had to school each other and myself on their theory of the flesh, "…where the physical realities of our lives — our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings - all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity."[109] And my own flesh remembers how it comes at a cost, how "There is nothing *easy* about a collective cultural history of what Mitsuye Yamada calls "unnatural disasters," the tragedies of living in a marginalized body under the regimes of white supremacy and capitalism.[110] How relationships bow under the weight of an imbalanced distribution of power and resources, how each new name that trends in the media means another day in bed, another bodily risk in protest, another sleepless night. Recognition that my response is inherently different, inherently lighter- I am moved by my witnessing and empathy borne out of longing for Queer community and love for my friends, but also by the deep anxiety of holding their experiences and feelings at the same time as they reveal to me my own monstrous whiteness. Not visibly making it about me, but silently internalizing a deep hate for myself and my history and being so often motivated to act from this selfish place. Feeling so clumsy, aware that my whiteness is so often an obstacle in their ability to receive support from me and in my ability to give it, one step away from inflicting violence myself through action or inaction, and knowing that I have already done so. It hurts knowing that my legacy is of one and the same violence that

[108] Green 2016, p.79
[109] Moraga, Cherríe and Gloria Anzaldúa, "Theory in the Flesh," in *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*, NY, 1981, p.23
[110] Ibid.

hurts them. I ache to know how, if "a Trans* method is a tool that helps us embark on the work of listening, understanding, and reading as both intellectual and political practices," how can I internalize their Trans* praxes and listen with my body?[111] What is my theory of the flesh, and how can I justify its application to my white, trans self? And how can I move from this painfully saturated yet still selfish place of witness and empathy and self-hate, of learning through the trauma of others or the trauma of friendships lost to dynamics we couldn't overcome, lost control in the face of police violence, lost place in community? I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. All I have is an urgent aching to do it.

"The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine."

- Judith Butler 2004, *Precarious Life*[112]

If whiteness is emergent, if it manifests in any given moment of interaction between my private body and public discourse, a node in a web of power relations, then that means I have the agency to intervene in its emergence. To find the "event of dissension," the place where I can choose to do something different.[113] Of course I cannot stop myself from being white, but if Black scholars and activists and *friends* have given me the tools, so often at their own expense, to clearly see what my whiteness means for them, then surely I have a responsibility to do something with those tools. Actually, they already told me to do something about it a long time ago. And if the scholarly methods that really speak to me are the ones that speak back to the strictures of a white

[111] Green 2016, p.80
[112] Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life,* Verso Books 2004, London UK, p.21
[113] Phillips, Kendall. "The Event of Dissension: Reconsidering the Possibilities of Dissent." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101:1, 2015, pp.60-71.

academy, are the ones that center the personal, the body exposed, to speak from the margins honestly, poetically, and accessibly, then surely I can use these methods in the space and support of the remaining 3 semesters of my academic program to turn my lens onto myself, expose and make sense of my own experiences of emerging as white and identify the specific possibilities for intervention. This is an uncomfortable idea, because who needs someone waxing poetic about whiteness? And why would I want to expose myself like that? And when I try to think in the concrete terms about exactly how, exactly what is happening in my body when I manifest in the world as white person, when I knowingly or unknowingly wield that power, I am met with a great emptiness. A great un-knowing, a lack of specifics, an idea of an end product, a perfect performance, the anti-racist white who has dismantled their own whiteness, but a sinister silence about the process of how. There's only a vacuum there, and a ravenous longing. But these scholars, these friends, these passionate and generous examples inspire me to commit to that longing, and I trust that I can follow it towards a just praxis of self.

Seeking the Home-Fire

Sometime in the late fall after the leaves have already fallen but before final papers are due, my Mom calls to tell me about her dream. In it she was on the farm, the one where she grew up picking tobacco with her sister and weathering hard snowed-in winters with only the food they had stored, where my own sister and I would run around barefoot with our cousins every summer, and where she would later pack her father's belongings and along with the rest of us daughters aunts uncles and cousins, to move him after the bank took the land. It had already been snatched up by a wealthy developer, eager to turn it into a gated community of summer homes just up the road from trailers and dirt-floored houses, and who broke into the house and hid the

cast iron stove in the woods so we couldn't get it out in time before the final eviction day. In the dream the barn was burning, and Mom and her sister and some other nameless figures were trying desperately to put the fire out with buckets and wet blankets. Then she saw Poppop standing there and watching, young and strong with a long ponytail like when she was young. She went to talk to him, and as they talked he began to whither and age as rapidly as he does in every other dream she's had about him since he died, until he's skeletal and pale. She asked him, "Why do you keep coming to me like this? Why don't you move on?" and he looked her in the eyes and said (and I always imagine him pointing and shaking his finger for this part), "You need to talk to Alex about breaking black magic."

It's like a moment outside of time, when a single gripping beat forces my heart upwards into my throat. I feel a little dizzy and lights dance before my eyes and I'm held there while it sinks in. It's gone as soon as it started, but I've already been alerted that: this is important. When we hang up the phone, I begin to scramble through the rush of thoughts and sensations, pleasure, anxiety, and a distant but deep longing comingling with the racing beats inside my chest. It's both pleasing and intimidating that I'm the one singled out by name to fix the curse, an affirmation of the little spells I did as a child, the books and tools and altars I collected, the times I thought I saw twinkling spirits responding to the stories I told them, and the anxious pull I always felt towards my grandfather of both love and fear, the same pull which kept me in the room with him all night as his rattling breath slowed. It reminds me of a recent night I'd forgotten, arranging an altar and dreaming of the feeling of a new place away from Greensboro, rattling around in my emptiness and longing to feel connected to something greater than human, to the spirits of my childhood and the skills to talk to them again. To when I tore down my altars as a teen along

with any traces of my transness in order to play hyper-femme, straight, normal. And to the inconsistent moments over the years since I left home, came out and became an organizer all at once, when I arranged bones and candles and rocks on cloths to sit and become covered in dust. To witnessing ritual in protest, Black and Indigenous femmes cutting eyes at cops while walking through with smudges, or a group offering to the land of the community garden, or the echoing of Asè which I breathed in with eyes and lips closed. I once mentioned to my friend how I used sage to clear away the scent of a man. And a look of discomfort flashed in their face for only a moment, quickly brushed away, but it was enough to send me back to my room to stare at the herb bundle on my dresser. To realize that even though I'd seen organizers doing it, and I was welcomed as part of that space in that moment, the fact of my whiteness precluded me from taking this piece of cultural sharing between Black and Indigenous people. And the strange weight of emptiness, the crying heartbeat of a vacuum full of longing for a spiritual practice I could be a part of and could share with my community. And the desperation with which I searched through wiccan and pagan webpages and books for something, *anything* that named the origins of its tools and practices, engaged on any level with the question of what are appropriate traditions for white people who don't want to steal their friends' spiritual practices. I did finally find one resource. A website called *Cailleach's Herbarium*, run by a Scottish man whose purpose is to preserve and share what he can of Scottish folk magic and sacred sites, patroned by the Grandmother spirit of the hills. And so I bought juniper, lavender and rosemary for saining (not smudging), I made an altar to the Cailleach, and I prayed for a pathway to my own tradition.[114]

[114] Richardson-Read, Scott. *Cailleach's Herbarium: Exploring Lost Scottish Folk Traditions,* online. https://cailleachs-herbarium.com

But here I am almost a year later and here is this cue from my own ancestor that I am, in fact, meant to do work in realms greater than mine, but I have absolutely no idea of what to do. I'm rusty in the realm of spells and curses. My altar sits still and dusty, and nothing I've read in my Wiccan and pagan books speaks to what to do when your ancestor implores you to break "black magic." Actually it's a taboo subject, a trigger for the "rule of three" in which any negative energy you create will return to you three-fold. Beyond the one beacon of a website I haven't looked at in months I still have no culturally appropriate teachers, no tradition, and no idea where to turn to find these things on such short and urgent notice. I do tell a select number of my friends about this dream, but I change the wording. I say, "My Poppop said 'you need to talk to Alex about breaking curses.'" I do this because saying "black magic" makes me uncomfortable, it savors of anti-Black racism because it creates a binary between Black and white, bad and good, and I don't trust it at the same time that I know this to be what my Poppop would have said. I don't have an answer for how I'm going to not only help him but also address his racism from the realm of the dead, which I know for a fact extended beyond this micro-aggressive wording in his lifetime. So I avoid it.

Some days later I find myself in a class discussion on thesis topics, the kind that tends to pop up as the semester approaches its end. I'm squirming because I'm no longer satisfied with the idea of just writing about race and activism, probing the margins, another white scholar re-wording and whitewashing marginalized voices on their own experiences of oppression. I want to follow the trail of what makes me uncomfortable, contribute to the discourse around the intricacies of whiteness so as to find some way to exist as I must within it and still preserve my integrity, when my professor encourages us to think of the thesis as an opportunity to dive into the details of

what we care most about. The vacuum within me stirs, an anxious reminder of my Poppop's message and my simultaneous resistance to the majority of magical practices I'm familiar with because of their sinister, stolen origins. And how much this resonates with the permeation of whiteness, how of course the white-owned occult shops and white-authored books I was familiar with wouldn't be actively engaging these questions or investing in anti-racist magical practices. But how at the same time it felt inauthentic and wrong to seek out the practices and traditions of my Black and Brown peers. And then I feel my eyes spread wide, my heart pump a single hard beat when I realize- I can interrogate why my Pagan witch books don't mention cultural theft! I can trace the genealogies of the practices in their pages, study the primary sources, and follow this path back to the authentic spiritual practices and magical tools that resonate with my ancestry! I can find a way to heed Poppop's call, restore my spiritual practices, and do scholarship at the same time! So my professor and I agree on an independent study which I call "Witchcraft and Colonialism," a deep dive into the rhetorical genealogies of mainstream Pagan witchcraft as I know it. I'm thrilled- I get to read witch books for school! And I get to authenticate my own practices, find the realness behind the fluff of mainstream pagan books!

So I find myself at the kitchen table that spring, gleeful to begin reading through my hand-made syllabus full of in-depth histories and rhetorical surveys by the best scholars I can find of western occult practices. As I begin reading, my eyes widen and I don't move from my spot for hours. My body stiffens, hands gripping the pages ever tighter as if to steady me so that I'm not knocked over by the motion of a great untangling. Pieces of memories weave before me as I read, of the first Wicca book of my pre-teen years and how it engendered in me a relationship with the Earth Goddess so strong that if I swore to her first I could do anything, even jump in a

pool of icy water. And how the four elements are called before each casting of the circle, the four tools of an altar, and how witchcraft was in some form handed down through the generations of women who escaped the Burning Times, and how it's our way back to nature amidst capitalist society. My heart aches as piece by piece these cornerstones begin to crumble, the nuances of their through-lines revealed as webs of false history, colonial influence, and a familiar post-capitalist longing. I am deeply unsettled, and I underline and write notes in margins that refer to the terms and histories I'm learning simultaneously from my Indigenous Feminisms professor this semester. A picture begins to emerge of an interconnected web of a timeline, weaving a story of the development of Pagan witchcraft that I'd never seen talked about before and whose nodes resonate too much with the same colonial timelines and logics that Indigenous writers and scholars dedicate themselves to revealing. The vacuum inside me grows, an exasperated ache as even what little practices I thought I had are steadily debunked and exposed.

The first thing I lose is my comfort and uncritical pride in the term *witch*, a word I understood to mean someone who practices magic, who is aligned with nature, who's a feminist, and who chooses to rekindle and carry on magical practices that were once persecuted. *A granddaughter of the witches they couldn't burn.* I'm shocked to realize that this positive identification with the word is only a few hundred years old, a shift "…rooted in the nineteenth century but flowering in the late twentieth."[115] Before this period, recorded European understandings of magical practices went through a timeline of many phases, resurfacing during times of social prosperity and retreating in upheaval, always stewarded by privileged classes of men and persecuted when the

[115] Hutton, Ronald. *The Witch: a History of Fear, from Ancient Times to The Present*, Yale University Press, 2017, pp.1-2

church rose to power.[116] But even in these contexts when magic and science were woven closer together by the alchemists and astronomers of Medieval and Renaissance French and English-speaking countries, witchcraft was still understood to be something entirely distinct in that it invariably denoted harmful magic, evil, something done to intentionally hurt or kill the neighbors and kinfolk of the witch in question.[117] Actually, there were whole professions of peasant folk magic practitioners, "cunning folk" and "wise folk" who made their livings by providing remedies for and protections against witchcraft, until their folk practices were eventually labeled as witchcraft as well by God-powered persecutors across Europe in an attempt to justify their punitive and murderous treatment of the peasant classes.[118] So there's this severe gap, a huge distinction between the blanketly negative associations of the figure of the witch until the 1800's, and its current positive associations after this period. I want to know why. I can feel a sinister cloud forming, unfolding as I get deeper and deeper into the semester, chasing an ugly picture that I simultaneously want to run away from and want to face down, holding onto hope that somewhere in the center is still a core of something wholesome and good.

There are tools that help me map its misty contours, Indigenous feminist wisdoms gifted by scholars and writers whose core investments are in uplifting Indigenous communities and contributing to their struggles for sovereignty and stewardship of the land. Such as Dean Itsuji Saranillio, whose definition of settler colonialism "describes a historically created system of power that aims to expropriate Indigenous territories… in order to replace Indigenous peoples

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[116] Gunn, Joshua. *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century*, The University of Alabama Press, 2005, pp.8-15; Hutton, Ronald. *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. Oxford
University Press, 1999
[117] Gunn 2005, pp.8-9
[118] Hutton 2017

with settlers who are discursively constituted as superior and thus more deserving over these contested lands and resources." This is a system "that 'destroys to replace' and requires an obstinate kind of ideological productivity" in order to do so.[119] Enter anthropologists and Christian missionaries, intellectuals who landed on stolen shores during the "age of Enlightenment" along with soldiers in order to ideologically produce a hollow picture of Indigenous people, one in which whole cultures become curios of a primitive and thus inferior past, a blip on a linear scale that Mishuana Goeman explains "…'place[s]' the Indian in a certain time frame, geographical location, and social hierarchy."[120] Mark Rifkin names this temporal orientation "settler time,"[121] his work weaving in with Goeman's and Saranillio's so that together they paint a picture of the strategic rhetoric of settler colonialism, which at the same time that it places Indigenous people into the othered categories of past and primitive, it also produces the modern European subject as forward-thinking and deserving by contrast: "…as long as 'primitives' could be proven as forever in the past, as a people whose history or futures were already written as obituaries, settlers could legitimate their occupation by asserting themselves as the modern inheritors of Native peoples' lands." This justifies the continuation of settler states to this day.[122] From this place emerges the whiteness of the European subject, borne from their contrast with colonized subjects whose Nativeness, Blackness and Brownness is racialized and defined as inferior. This why Wolfe, a settler-scholar contributes that "we cannot simply say that settler colonialism or genocide have been targeted at particular races, since a race cannot be

[119] Saranillio, Dean Itsuji. "Settler Colonialism," Native Studies Key Words. The University of Arizona Press, 2015, p.284
[120] Goeman, Mishuana. "Land as Life: Unsettling the Logics of Containment," *Native Studies Keywords.* Eds. Teves, Stephanie, Andrea Smith and Michelle Raheja. University of Arizona Press, 2015, p.83
[121] Rifkin, Mark. *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self Determination*. Duke University Press, 2017
[122] Saranillio 2015, p.288

taken as given. It is made in the targeting."[123] The settler articulation of a linear time scale and of cultures as occupying a forwards or backwards place on that scale is an essential mechanism, enabling the racialized production of selfhood through settler claims to land.

And what about these 17th and 18th century intellectuals, fresh in their possessive whiteness, and these newly re-produced European subjects? When the anthropologists and evangelists came back home, they "… gave rise to a distinctive genre of literature: the memoir of missionary work among tribal societies," memoirs that emphasized and criminalized the Indigenous spiritual practices of Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Americas as Pagan heathenry, further justifying the Enlightenment culture's air of superiority and religiously justified manifest destiny.[124] And it wasn't just Native cultures under scrutiny, but those same texts were "given an additional potency by being projected backwards onto the ancient European past…by the midcentury the connection was both explicit and endorsed by apparent objective scholarship."[125] What ended up happening was this colonialism-fueled "Enlightenment and scientific revolution brought about a sea of change in European understandings of folk traditions. As Europeans became aware that their own traditions could be compared to those of the people from the colonies, they created a new discourse of rationality aimed at banishing traditional ways of knowing from educated perspectives."[126] In order to bolster their fresh and hollow superiority, European intellectuals began dissociating from their own past, identifying where it resonated with the cultures they were now condemning and inspiring the development of folkloristics, a nascent branch of

[123] Wolfe, Patrick. "Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8:4, 2006, p.388
[124] Hutton 1999, p.6
[125] Hutton 1999, p.7
[126] Magliocco, Sabina. *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2004, p.4

Anthropology. The result was that "many folklorists from this time period collected and compiled lore in order to debunk it, with the certainty that traditional practices were destined to disappear as more rational views prevailed."[127] And what of the common folk, those peasants in villages who stories were collected and dismissed by the literate elite? Simultaneous to this intentional, intellectual defilement of their folk ways, peasants were being shuffled as labor for industrialization and the creation of the working class. They were finally forced to leave their ancestral homelands, migrating as impoverished refugees into urban centers in order to meet the labor demands of a burgeoning capitalist economy. Families crowded into unsanitary, tight spaces and the emptied countryside finally became property in the transition from communal to private ownership that began centuries before with the Enclosures, when gentry and religious institutions co-strategized to "eliminate communal land property and expand their holdings."[128] The result was that by the mid nineteenth century 50% of Europeans lived in urban centers, and by the end of the century that number rose to 80%.[129] Whole villages were razed to the ground to make space for animal grazing and private agriculture,[130] and natural landscapes became a place of recreation for the wealthy and deep nostalgic longing for the poor, a pathos so powerful that it fueled the rise of the Romantic era in the height of the 18th century. The Romantic era intelligentsia critiqued Enlightenment thinking, and offered a backlash to the development of capitalism; suddenly, nature, tradition, and communal lifeways which had just endured a century of derision became desirable to the point of becoming a literary cliché.[131] Traditions previously

[127] Ibid.
[128] Federici, Sylvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, Autonomedia, 2004, p.69
[129] Davenport, Romola. Urbanization and Mortality in Britain, c.1800-50." The Economic History Review Spring 2020, p.1
[130] Federici 2004, p.70
[131] Hutton 1999

thrown out and mocked because of their "primitiveness" became valuable, a cherished salve for the people's deep "yearning for a lost sense of connectedness and authenticity, which they located in the changing countryside and in the lives and customs of European peasants."[132] Only, by then it was too late.

There is a connection between the dispossession of the European peasant class from their lands and the violent removal of colonized Indigenous peoples from theirs. Aileen Moreton-Robinson connects the two, in that "taking possession of Indigenous people's lands was a quintessential act of colonization and was tied to the transition from the Enlightenment to modernity, which precipitated the emergence of a new subject into history within Europe." This emergence only became possible after "major social, legal, economic, and political reforms had taken place, changing the feudal nature of persons and property relationship" in Europe, thus resulting in "the rise of 'possessive individualism,' that is, upon an increasing consciousness of the distinctness of each self-owning human entity as the primary political and social value." Finally, out of the confluence of these simultaneous violences, "a new white property owning subject emerged in history and possessiveness became embedded in everyday discourse."[133] This possessive subjectivity, this appetite for ownership borne from the loss of nourishing communal relationships to land and simultaneously stealing land from other people, greatly restricted the ability of Romantic era folklorists and writers to *actually* rekindle a substantial connection to the past, because they were already too deeply rooted in a culture which had been forcibly shifted by its elite to revolve around the possession of property. In what is more than a coincidence, at this exact place and time came the emergence of many secret occult societies amongst the Romantic

[132] Magliocco 2004, pp.6-7
[133] Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. *The White Possessive*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015, p.49

era elite, groups of wealthy and highly educated men (and occasionally one or two woman) who established entire cosmologies including the existence of the one true Earth Goddess and Sky God,[134] standardized ritual technologies such as the formal calling of the cardinal corners,[135] and the adapted usage of various ancient symbols such as the invocation of the pentagram.[136] These groups competed for a claim to *the one true* knowledge of authentic magical practices of the past.[137] Many of them funded and directed folkloristic expeditions, searching for affirmations of their cosmologies and ritual practices, and it is "this 'search for authenticity' [that] was at the root of the birth of folkloristics as a discipline."[138] Instead of collecting folklore in order to refute it as did their Enlightenment forebearers, Romantic era folklorists fervently gathered it in order to claim a sense of connection to their preferred understanding of lost ways. Occult leaders desperately sought to prove that their practices were true "pagan survivals," or "Folk customs, [which] therefore, could represent cultural fossils, left over from the earlier stages of civilized societies," therefore authenticating direct ties between their own groups' beliefs and ancestral Paganism.[139] However, their efforts were thwarted by the deeply nostalgic nature of their own looking back. Instead, folklorists succumbed to the "irresistible temptation to many collectors and commentators to reshape their own source material," including folk myths, songs, ceremonies, festivals and dances. Because of their "assumption that rural life was essentially unchanging…it was also assumed that the people who actually held the beliefs and practiced the customs would long have forgotten their original, 'real,' significance, which could only be

[134] Huttonn 1999, p. 50
[135] Ibid. p.56
[136] Ibid. p.71
[137] Ibid. p.50
[138] Magliocco 2004 pp.6-7
[139] Hutton 1999, p.113

reconstructed by scholars."[140] Almost as though they were stuck, static on an evolutionary time scale. The kicker is that while these publications were widely disdained and disproven by historians, they took off wildly in popular culture, and it sickens me to recognize that some of these tools and "histories" endure today in the popular mythos of Pagan witchcraft. Like the Earth-Goddess, the invocation of the pentagram, the calling of the corners, the lust for nature and an authentic tie to *the witches they couldn't burn*. Crumbling cornerstones.

I feel this as an inevitable tragedy. How sad that the opportunity to gather dwindling European folk ways, *my* ancestral folk ways, was lost in the height of the industrialization of European nations and land theft from the common folk, as pseudo-scholarly folklorists argued with the sparse population of remaining village elders about how their own folk practices were inauthentic or incorrect. And it's not only sad but sinister, because of the parallel between the discursive construction of European villagers as living statically in the past and lacking expertise on the meanings of their own fetishized practices, their lives probed for pagan survivals as intellectual property to be owned in a competition for authenticity, and the burgeoning system of colonial capitalism which treated Indigenous peoples in the same ways at the same time, only against them it functioned doubly as a justification for mass murder and cultural genocide. It's also no coincidence that these occult groups, the Freemasons famous among them, offered more than ritual technologies; they became a rare enclave for progressive intellectuals, a "safe space in which they could discuss any concepts except those relating to religion and politics, with colleagues bonded by an ideology of equality and brotherhood."[141] This de-politicized Pagan space, its availability only to a privileged class of people, and its dissonance with the violent

[140] Hutton 1999, p.127
[141] Ibid. p.53

outcomes experienced by the Indigenous peoples of Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Americas when faced with parallel assemblages of colonialism, still echoes in Pagan spaces today. In how every Pagan group I've encountered is largely populated by liberal-minded and middle-class white people, and every occult store I've been in is white-owned and full of identical shelves of white-authored books next to "Native American" tarot decks, "African Voudoo Dolls," "Tibetan singing bowls" and Chakra-stones. These Indigenous feminist frameworks teach me how to listen, and I can hear the echoes of this European elite counter-culture of a century ago, who tapped into their own nostalgia and longing for lost land and that of the peasant class, in order to foster a resurgence of "the word 'Pagan,' which had become equipped with connotations of freedom, self-indulgence, and ancient knowledge...as the century grew to a close, the positive language of paganism grew more aggressive," as a means to oppose "Puritanism, Labour, and Humbug."[142] What a tragic, familiar contradiction, this desire to resist the culture that stifles and steals folk ways, but doing so through the same rhetorical strategies that explicitly emerged as a pre-condition of that theft. I can feel myself repeating this cycle, and I want desperately to find a way out of it. So I keep going.

There's still more to this connection between the attractiveness of authenticity, the sexiness of pagan survivals, and the occurrence of land theft. In "Land as Life," Mishuana Goeman unpacks Indigenous understandings of Land as more than property. She challenges academia and Western culture more broadly to reconsider the relationship of land-as-property: "From the physical homelands of indigenous peoples stem the production of our social, economical, and political relationships to our community, other tribal Nations, and nation-states… *land* and *water* are what

[142] Ibid. p. 27

are uniquely pivotal to tribal identity and survivance."[143] By understanding the equation of land to property as a Western illness that rises like black smoke from an industrial factory, and the subsequent removal of that property from Indigenous people, we get a fuller image of the deep cultural violence of colonialism. Goeman urges us to understand that "Land is foundational to people's cultural practices," and "by thinking through land as a meaning-making process rather than a claimed object," we can see how land is more than just life; it is ontology and pedagogy, social structure, community and ceremony.[144] Knowing this highlights the unspeakable, multi-layered experience of colonial violence against Indigenous people; it also tells us something of the settler relationship to land, specifically the mad rush by settler societies to force a sense of belonging to the places they steal: "The inability to bind land to settler societies or expunge Indigenous sense of place is the anxiety producing thorn in the side of nation-states…"[145] Such anxiety prompts settler states to invest an exorbitant amount of energy in the production of a mythos that justifies settler nations' continued inhabitance of Native lands: "Building the spaces of the nation, from the individual citizen to the borders that demarcate it, required creating its own national creation myths. Indians are a significant factor in settler-colonial myths and creation stories."[146] Goeman elaborates that "Native bodies…were conceived of as part of the flora and fauna. This animalization of Native bodies and subsequent codification of the doctrine of discovery during the 1830s…resulted in legalizing conquest and incorporating Native lands into the regimes of geographical knowledge produced by the state…"[147] Enter the Romantic flare

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[143] Goeman, Mishuana. "Land as Life: Unsettling the Logics of Containment," *Native Studies Keywords.* Eds. Teves, Stephanie, Andrea Smith and Michelle Raheja. University of Arizona Press, 2015, p.71
[144] Ibid. pp.72-73
[145] Ibid. p.76
[146] Ibid. p.83
[147] Goeman, Mishuana. *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*, University of Minnesota Press, 2013, p.33

involved in animalizing Indigenous bodies and land, which Phillip Deloria speaks to when he reveals how "…Indians represented instinct and freedom. They spoke for the 'spirit of the continent.' Whites desperately desired that spirit… Savage Indians served Americans as oppositional figures against whom one might imagine a civilized national Self. Coded as freedom, however, wild Indianness proved equally attractive, setting up a 'have the cake and eat it too' dialectic of simultaneous desire and repulsion."[148] This simultaneous desire and repulsion plays out in the figure of the "Noble Savage," which "both juxtaposes and conflates an urge to idealize and desire Indians and a need to despise and dispossess them," playing a key role in settler self-imagination in terms of dealing with anxiety around belonging.[149] The *Noble Savage* becomes crucial to modern settler self-imagination in that white settlers are able to take up the positive aspects of imagined "Indianness" in the act of "playing Indian," or putting on the costume of an "authentic" Indian self. In fact, the act of "playing Indian" was pivotal in key moments of the American Revolution, such as the Boston Tea Party when British settlers dressed in the feathers of Indian parody in order to symbolically align themselves with an authentic relationship to the American colonies, to be emboldened by a sense of "wild resistance," and finally to resist the existential dread of an urbanizing landscape: "[the] Revolution…rested on the creation of a national identity, and modernity, which has used Indian play to encounter the authentic amidst the anxiety of urban industrial and postindustrial life."[150] While Deloria speaks specifically to how "*playing Indian*" is essential to the formation of American settler identity, this anatomy of appropriation resonates with the context of authenticity-hoarding feuds between

[148] Deloria, Philip Joseph. *Playing Indian*. Yale University Press, 1998, p.3
[149] Ibid. p.4

Occult groups and their folklorist missionaries back in Europe, and the romantic allure of the "wild landscape" that inspired the entire Romantic era.

How familiar, the allure of "wild resistance" and authenticity. And how could it be a coincidence, that playing Indian became integral to the nascent settler mythos directly before and during the same time that the Pagan resurgence in Europe sought to attribute a wild, nature-loving mythos to their own ancestral folk ways? What was the purpose of the Occult-group folklorists who doctored and embellished their accounts if not "to encounter the authentic amidst the anxiety of urban industrial and postindustrial life."[151] And what of their explicit association of Druids as Europe's own Noble savages, a white version of this "authentic" mystical archetype?[152] And what of the cosmologies of Romantic-era Occult groups, wherein by the 1830's they largely held that in fact all of the world's religions stemmed from one original, universal religion, whose deities were the earth/moon Goddess and the sky/sun God, condensing Europe's actual diverse Pagan into a succinct and ruling couple? And what about the nature of this couple, particularly the Earth Mother, a novel archetype who emerged through the Romantic-era "exaltation of the natural and irrational, qualities that had conventionally been both feared and disparaged and characterized as feminine,"[153] at the exact time that settler anxieties pushed for a veneration and equation of the colonized Native other's body as inherently of nature, and nature as inherently feminine, inherently conquerable?[154] An association so explicit we can see its seeds in voyage accounts, such as when the French explorer Bougainville "explicitly compared the Tahitians with ancient Greeks: '…A naked young Tahitian girl on the

[152] Hutton 1999, p.9
[153] Ibid. p.33
[154] Deloria 1998, p.7

deck of appeared, 'as Venus…herself to the Phrygian shepherd having the celestial form of that goddess.'"[155] There are too many links, parallels, and coincidences. And if there's one thing I know from practicing magic, and from organizing for social justice against systemic oppression, it's that there *are* no coincidences. Even my cursory look into the early history of the same iteration of the Paganism that's mainstream today, wherein a witch is someone you want to be, reveals how Paganism became meaningful through the assemblages of colonialism: possessive individualism and the emergence of white subjects, nostalgic colonial "scholarship," the fetishization of authenticity and the desirous conflation of Indigenous bodies to all that is wild and sexy about nature but only insofar as it can be owned. This fraught articulation clarifies the urgency of the hunt for pagan survivals, as Occult leaders "were discovering, imagining, and constructing images of a culture which was the antithesis of the civilization to which they belonged…[this] explains the compulsive manner in which classicists and folklorists alike sought to uncover traces of hidden, disturbing, and alluring past, and to reconstruct it" imaginatively within their groups.[156] That genuine ache and longing for connection to lost land and lost ways, that genuine desire to resist industrialism, inevitably thwarted by its own invocation of key nodes in the web of colonial discourse.

And so I arrive at this place where I can see the historical precedence for how my own longing for spiritual, communal lifeways becomes so easily twisted and hollowed out into a sexy counter-cultural Pagan witchcraft, progressive, free and nature-loving, but also capitalist, also colonialist, also possessive and elite. I feel sick, and isolated. What else do I have? What other options? By the time I get to researching the 20th and 21st centuries, to the figures who developed

[155] Ibid.
[156] Hutton 1999, p.26

Romantic-era Occult Paganism into systems like Wicca, the Goddess movement, and Eclectic Paganism, finally incorporating the word "witch" into the vernacular in its current positive iteration, I'm jaded. And I'm not surprised to read that the key figures who stewarded Paganism from the 19th into the 20th and 21st centuries were also fluent in the discourses and tactics of colonialism. Figures like Eliphas Levi, grandfather of popular ritual magic who in the mid-19th century did a great deal to accumulate Occult knowledge into one comprehensive system, in order "to provide a conceptual framework and a set of practical manuals for a new generation of magicians."[157] In doing so, he pulled creatively from a diversity of sources, linking "the ancient Egyptian religion with the Templars and the legend of the Holy Grail, and blend[ing] the two greatest early modern European magical systems, the caballa and the Tarot."[158] He was the first who adapted and popularized the ancient symbol of the pentagram as a ritual technology, evoked by drawing it in the air, an act which is still a cornerstone of Pagan witchcraft today. As well as the tendency to pull an eclectic mixture of magical knowledge from a diversity of traditions, especially if they're from far away, exoticized places like Egypt. Aleister Crowley for example had no qualms with pulling magical practices from various sources. He was another aficionado of Egypt and collector of idealized Egyptian customs,[159] and was largely responsible for popularizing sex magic, pulling amongst other various sources from his claimed "authentic" knowledge of ancient Hindu Tantra sex magic, a body of practices that is still rampantly misunderstood and misappropriated in the west today.[160] This is in addition to the fact that he was an unmistakable proto-fascist, evidenced among other things by the fact that he *literally*

[157] Hutton 1999, p.70
[158] Ibid. p.72
[159] Ibid. p.178
[160] Urban, Hugh. "Introduction: Sex Magic, Modernity, and the Search for Liberation," *MagiaSexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism*, University of California Press, 2006, pp.123-127

tried to sell his magical system to Adolph Hitler, believing it to be a potential "philosophical basis for Nazism."[161] Margaret Murray was another aficionado of everything Egyptian, and in addition to her 25 books on Egypt she published one called *The Witch Cult* and another called *The God of the Witches,* both about how "witches were practitioners of a Pagan religion that differed from Christianity in its attitudes to sexuality, gender and the nature of religious rites. She based her claim on ancient Egyptian religion, her academic specialism."[162] This origin narrative of a single unified, sexually liberated Pagan witchcraft religion that directly precedes contemporary witchcraft is colloquially named the *Murray Thesis,* which despite its blatant inaccuracy and derision in the academy, became so wildly popular that it is still to this day the enduring assumption that belies contemporary Pagan texts.[163] And there's even Gerald Gardner, a friend of Murray's and supporter of the witch-cult thesis, who famously brought Pagan witchcraft back to the public eye in the 1950's after its World War-induced decline. He claimed to have met a coven of witches connected to the ancient cults, learned from them, and published an account of "true witchcraft." He went on to found the Wiccan religion whose adaptation and expansion of earlier Romantic era occult technologies (including for example the invocation of the pentagram) are still vastly incorporated into nearly every contemporary Pagan guidebook to some degree. Or were they Crowley's adaptations? There is still no historical consensus on the arguments between Gardner and Crowley's son around the degree to which Crowley actually wrote Gardner's rituals, nor on the degree or nature of their relationship,[164] though Gardner was apparently named by Crowley as his spiritual successor.[165] Gardner did all of this, of course,

[161] Ibid. p.117
[162] Gibson, Marion. *Witchcraft, the Basics*. Routledge, 2018. P.101
[163] Hutton 1999, pp.196-199
[164] Ibid. pp.216-219
[165] Gibson 2018, p.126

after he retired in 1936 from an abundant career as "the owner or manager of tea and rubber plantations in Ceylon, North Borneo, and Malaya, and then as an inspector in the Malay customs service."[166] And these are the ancestors of the Pagan context I have access to today, their trails left in the primary sources they created in their lifetimes and in the discourse that formed around them and endure today.

I'm embarrassed. Disappointed and smarting that I was foolish enough to believe I was going to find the authentic root, the "pagan survival" that underpins my current magical knowledge and that which I hope to build. It stings to feel the places where I too fetishize authenticity, I too am so incapable of thinking outside of the orientations of settler time and settler desire, saturated with nostalgia. And I'm angry, that I never stood a chance of knowing the land-epistemologies of my Ancestors, their ceremonies and spirits, their community structures, and that my desire to do so is confined by this parasitic husk of truth that colonialism and whiteness sucked dry centuries ago. And I'm uncomfortable, because this anger and this ache resonates with what I've heard from people whose ancestors were stolen, or killed, or removed from their lands, in the efforts to build the empires that still materially benefit me to this day. To which my recent ancestors contributed. So I want to burn it all, throw away all my books and altars and denounce the whole thing! But. Something tells me to pause. To sit amongst the debris of sinister cornerstones and disappointing predecessors and listen with my body for the distant warmth of a fire. A place where my Ancestors gather, the older ones who lived in reciprocity, and whose ways of knowing revolved around something other than the possession of property. Or maybe it's land spirits, or ghosts, or Gods. All I know is that they're there, and that my longing to feel the warmth of that

[166] Hutton 1999, p.205

fire and the welcome of that community and those ways of being is something inherently human and I cannot denounce it. Despite this mess of Paganism, these shameful actions of its key predecessors, its own embeddedness in the mechanisms of colonialism, the complacency and whiteness of its spaces and authors and rituals, I cannot help but to recognize myself in it, specifically the part of myself that aches to know the warmth of that fire. And I cannot turn away. So then, what can I do instead? I feel an ember forming, a hope that this deep longing, this drive to remember a life outside of the fragmentation of racist capitalism, is really what attracts the witches of today towards Paganism. Because if that's the case, then it means we can find a way to honor that call, and I have a growing sense that honoring that call means finding a practice that explicitly interrupts the reproduction of colonial tactics in the spiritual *and* material realms. *This* feels like divine work, the kind of work a well-meaning white witch should be doing. And it's here that I find myself on a plane with a ticket I convinced my department to pay for in the name of research, holding this call and preparing myself to greet with open curiosity my first Pagan gathering: California Witchcamp.

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"What is important about a general understanding of the history of Occultism, is not then, its accuracy or fidelity to past fact. Rather, the origin narrative told by scholars and students of the occult is simply an important part of its specificity as a discourse."

- Joshua Gunn 2005, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century*[167]

[167] Gunn 2005, pp. p.8-9

Because I now know without a doubt that "the origin narrative often told by occultists is fanciful and often inaccurate according to even the most relative of documentary standards," I am led to ask, where does that leave me?[168] And where does it leave other witches who are invested in disrupting colonialism and interrupting whiteness? And should we even call ourselves witches? And why hasn't the repeated, documented scholarly and historical debunking of Pagan witchcraft's collective mythos been able to interrupt the reproduction of these myths in popular imagination so far? In thinking through these questions, I pause to appreciate how "for Pagans, folklore becomes an important tool to discover the past and bring authenticity to contemporary spiritual practice," how it works "…to create a link to the historical past, imagined as a more spiritually authentic time."[169] I pause to appreciate too the historical tension between scholars and Pagans, which despite how intertwined these groups have always been is perhaps rooted in the antagonism early Enlightenment folklore scholars exhibited when they collected folk ways with the sole purpose of deriding them. I also can't help but to respect the Pagan impulse to distrust scholars and historians and to prioritize colloquial and folk knowledge, an impulse I recognize as a desire to actively identify with and support the voices of the margins. I certainly have read enough scholarly work about contemporary witchcraft that depicts modern Pagans as silly at best and perniciously misguided at worse to know that this attitude is still the norm of the academy. However. There is a deeply valuable potential for contemporary scholarship, especially in the realm of Indigenous feminisms, Black feminisms, Queer and Trans methodologies to help Pagans comb through our collective grimoire of mythoi and practicum, to find the places where they are rooted in colonialism and white possession. And there is value for scholars, in recognizing that the legitimacy of Pagan discourse doesn't reside only in its adherence to

[168] Gunn 2005, p.8
[169] Maglioco 2004, pp.6-7

historical fact, but is in itself a vibrant formation that speaks volumes to the reactions, longings, and creative power of a community of people linked via their self-identified calling across centuries of development, that moves people to action and is in no way slowing or shrinking from the world any time soon. I long for a way to reconcile the antagonisms between these two realms of discourse, because I know that if BIPOC scholars can weave life-giving knowledge and live-saving maps of oppressive power-webs from their experiences, and if witches can create and imagine into being entire ritual systems, tools, customs, lore and cultures then the potential of a confluence between them is revolutionary. What culture-shifting potential, what radical *power* is possible when an entire popular subculture of people goes back to the shadow places of our origin stories, bravely binding the parts that reinvoke oppressive scripts, following these lovingly given maps to the places where we can manifest new practices, new stories, that carve new pathways towards liberation and belonging?

"I begin with land as meaning-making place because that is at the heart of Indigenous identity, longing, and belonging."

- Mishuana Goeman 2015, "Land as Life: Unsettling the Logics of Containment"[170]

I always return to the story of how Pagan witchcraft's emergence as something positive and powerful is intertwined with the reactions of European peoples to the experience of industrialization, the destruction of their communities and their removal from their home lands.[171] How the longing for something authentic grew here, in that familiar ache for the warmth of home fire. And how this thread still resonates, is actually characteristic of

[170] Goeman 2015, p.73
[171] Federici 2004

contemporary Pagan practice because connecting to land and nature is deeply important here, a prized place of worship and source of power and healing. But what happens when the only people who have access to a forcibly vacated countryside are a privileged elite? And when they see it through an ontology of possession, their home-lust informed by its resonance with the allure of faraway exotic places, bodies, beliefs? And when these are the same elites who laid the foundations for our contemporary witching discourse? And what happens when hundreds of years later settler Pagans like myself *still* nurse our desire for a connection to land-worshiping ways, are driven by it, but the land we live on is stolen by the empires that precede and contain us, empires that simultaneously *omit and refuse* a relationship to land as the socio-discursive ground within which human relations are built? And what happens when that desire is filtered again through the colonial logic, language, and longing of our predecessors? It's like a hole that can't be filled, our efforts strained and futile because they are bound to settler anxiety and nostalgia for an imagined authentic past that omits the violence inherent in the precipitating conditions of this longing. This is a condition rooted in industrialism, possession, and colonial capitalism, a kind of desire which Lisa Aldred speaks to when she quotes Pemina Yellowbird and Kathryn Milun, naming it unmistakably as "'imperialist nostalgia,' which they define as a romanticism that assumes a pose of innocent yearning thus concealing its complicity with often brutal domination."[172] So what do I do with this? How do I remove the mistiness from my eyes when I imagine "communing with nature," and what would it mean to actually honor the land where I live and desire to practice magic?

[172] Aldred, Lisa. "Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sundances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality," *The American Indian Quarterly*, 24:3, 2000, p.334

"Belonging is about more than privileges – it is about taking up the responsibilities and obligations of the people and the place. Belonging is about being woven into the fabric of the land and its legacies, accepting the knowledge that your future is a shared future, and that you are accountable to those around you."

- Aileen Moreton-Robinson 2016, *Critical Indigenous Studies: Engagements in First World Locations*[173]

I long to learn a way to belong to this place in spite of the ease with which my desire becomes a mechanism of colonialism, despite the languages of possession I am fluent in, despite the fact that the rituals and ceremonies I have access to are as intertwined with the legacy of empire as are my own Ancestors. So I'm grateful when I read N. Scott Momaday, who says: "None of us lives apart from the land entirely; such an isolation is unimaginable. We do not act upon a stagnant landscape, but instead are a part of it. Place is created in the process of remembering and telling stories and the ability for the receiver to understand the meanings of place encapsulated in language."[174] What needs to be done in order that I might understand the meanings of *this* place? What stories, legacies, memories am I ignoring when I cast a circle, do a ritual in this place where I don't belong? And if "meaningful relationship demands something of us, sometimes everything,"[175] then what is demanded of me as a settler witch who deigns to be in relationship with the land, who draws power and peace from the places where I live and worship? This feels like a question which begs an eternally unfolding answer, in what Moreton-Robinson calls "the paradox of learning: the more we learn, the less we know. We must learn to

[173] Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. *Critical Indigenous Studies: Engagements in First World Locations*, University of Arizona Press, 2016, p.26
[174] Momaday, N.S. 1993. 'Man Made of Words' in *The Remembered Earth*, ed. G. Hobson. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. p.358
[175] Moreton-Robinson 2016, p.26

unlearn, and to be comfortable with the unknown," and in doing so open up the chance to "…locate our understanding in the place we come from or the place we now inhabit, the histories to which we belong by birth, choice, or circumstance, a place to drop anchor as we reach outward for connection."[176] So as I reach outward I lean in, to the first concrete steps I can take: seek the shadow-places of your own history, so you can learn not to repeat it. If the only language you know is possessive, then be still and listen. Move with humility. Regard the Land as alive, and listen to their stories. Learn what happened to their people. And how to help now. *How to help now, materially*, to steward the return of Indigenous people to this land. This is how you restore an epistemology of reciprocity. And remember that "Decolonization is not a metaphor," it is more than an intellectual exercise or a synonym for unlearning, and it "cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks."[177] The path to that warm home-fire becomes a little lighter, a little closer as I learn that to truly commune with the land, to honor the spirits of this place, I must honor its people first. And to approach belonging is to be honest about the ways I don't belong here, and to relinquish the certainty of my own future as I seek concrete ways to support Indigenous sovereignty now, in this lifetime. As I seek this joining, I become warmer. As I seek this joining, I become fuller.

"Yet, this joining cannot be too easy, too open, too settled. Solidarity is an uneasy, reserved, and unsettled matter that neither reconciles present grievances nor forecloses future conflict."

- Eve Tuck and Yang 2012, "Decolonization is not a Metaphor,"[178]

[176] Moreton-Robinson 2016, pp.22-23
[177] Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society*, 1:1, 2012, p3
[178] Tuck and Yang 2012, p.3

IV

Seeking Praxis

The crossroads and the call to action

Hecate is the first Black goddess to be honored by a week of devotion at California Witchcamp. We know her as the Keeper of the Crossroads, the Holder of the Flame, and the Mother of the Darkness, but the fact of her Blackness is something not usually named; because she has been popularly known for many centuries in Europe as the Goddess of the witches, her depiction is most often that of a woman or of three women with pale skin and European features. But her story vastly predates her arrival in Europe. She came from Greece, and before that Persia, and before that Egypt where she was midwife to Isis, protector of women and children, liberator of enslaved people, and prisoners and rape survivors.[179] Her first name is Heqet, and on the first day of class or "path," our teachers of *The Magic of (Un)Crossing: the path of the warrior healer* open by explicitly contextualizing and naming this particular form of erasure in the witchcraft community, exemplified by but in no way limited to how we understand this Goddess. I lean in, buzzing with eagerness. I've been longing for a space like this path and teachers like these, who through an embodied, ritualized pedagogy of chants, trances, exorcisms and spells lead us through an explicit excavation of stolen practices and an interrogation of white possessiveness in magic, all as part of building a praxis that utilizes shadow work, defensive and offensive magic to seek the places where we are bound by oppressive structures and most importantly, to take action to tear them down. Another thing Coyote, one of our teachers says on the first day is this:

[179] Vargas, Coyote-Preston and Abel Gomez. *The Magic of (Un)Crossing: the path of the warrior healer.* California Witchcamp June 2019

"'Love and light only' magic is a privilege made available by the army of Black and Brown witches who have always been on the frontlines hexing their oppressors."[180] I drink in every word, feeling that I'm exactly where I need to be. As I listen my fingers naturally find the little bulge in my pocket, tap against the small vial of chalk-like powder stopped up with wax by my mother shortly after Poppop came back in a sealed brick of ashes. A feeling starts to grow, an inkling that the synthesis woven in this path between shadow work, politicized curse-breaking and social justice resonates with my own dual mission to find an accountable magical praxis and to break the curse that has my grandfather calling to me from dreams to free him from his withering purgatory.

I first heard about Witchcamp, a geographically varied network of retreats in the Reclaiming tradition of witchcraft, when I came across "An Open Letter to the British Columbia Witchcamp on Issues of Cultural Appropriation & Respect" by Naomi Archer, a white American woman. The letter was originally published on her blog *Awakening the Horse People,* which is dedicated to answering the desires of white people for a sense of belonging in spiritual community "not by taking or stealing from other Indigenous Nations – but by decolonizing to find a path back to our own European ancestral connections and identities."[181] In her letter to BC Witchcamp, Archer takes the organizers of the week-long educational retreat to task for "Cultural appropriation, spiritual colonialism, and cultural disrespect within Reclaiming paganism [which] deserve to be prioritized and addressed," including the lack of acknowledgement for and nonconsensual use of Skwxwú7mesh lands directly across a lake from a contemporary Skwxwú7mesh settlement, as

[180] Ibid.
[181] Archer, Naomi "Who We Are," *Awakening the Horse People*, accessed December 2020 https://awakeningthehorse.wordpress.com/about/who-we-are/

well as the incorporation of the Hindu deity Ganesha into the theme of the camp for the week. "These attitudes," Archer continues, "and behaviors prevent effective solidarity with Indigenous peoples and other people of color, enforce white settler supremacy and colonialism, and prevent healthy relationship building with those affected."[182] *Yikes*, I thought. While the idea of a witchcraft retreat was new and enticing to me, I was immediately turned off by Archer's description of how it was happening. *So much for Witchcamp.*

Months later when I mentioned my research interests in a conversation during my Indigenous feminisms course, my classmate Abel responded enthusiastically. He too had long-identified as a witch, and he too actively contended with how to reconcile settler witchcraft with his desire to embody an anti-racist and anti-colonial praxis. When we met up later, I told him about the open letter to BC Witchcamp and how it informed my research and also my hesitation around engaging in witchcraft at all. To my surprise, he was familiar with it. In fact, he had been a member of Reclaiming for over a decade, and he had troubled feelings about the letter. On one part, as one of the small number of People of Color in Reclaiming he understood well the pervasiveness of white logics in that space. He recounted the changes he'd been privy to in BC Camp since Archer published her critiques, and subsequently the shifts within his home camp in California around land acknowledgement, pushing for relationship building with the Indigenous peoples of the land, and a rearticulation of the language used by camp leaders to explicitly frame it within a consciousness of settler colonialism. In response to the charges of cultural appropriation around the incorporation of Ganesha- that, he said, was more complicated, and the

[182] Archer, Naomi "An Open Letter to the British Columbia Witchcamp on Issues of Cultural Appropriation & Respect" July 2014. https://witchesunionhall.wordpress.com/2014/07/31/an-open-letter-to-the-british-columbia-witchcamp-on-issues-of-cultural-appropriation-respect/

notion of appropriation on which Archer relied in writing her letter was too simple. Although Reclaiming like many Pagan witching communities was majority white, it's also true that BIPOC witches have always been integral to it, have always been shaping the culture of the tradition and were currently in a moment of struggling against the erasure of both their influences and their specific cultures within the community. It turns out, a queer Hindu person of South Asian descent (he didn't specify) had been one of the key organizers of BC camp that year, and had carefully and intentionally crafted reverence for Ganesha into the camp's narrative for the week, wherein the campers would learn Ganesha's stories and celebrate him in worship. This was part of a larger effort of a coalition of BIPOC within Reclaiming who wanted to push back against the pervasiveness of centering only European deities and stories within the camps' yearly narratives.[183] To dismiss their efforts to create spaces for cultural sharing on their own terms and reverence that honored their own traditions felt for Abel akin to continuing the violence of erasure that already alienates BIPOC within the Reclaiming community.

It was also Abel who told me about the upcoming camp in California that summer, where he was co-teaching a path (class) with Coyote Vargas, a Queer Black Wampanoag healer and friend. In crafting the camp's story for the week, Abel, Coyote, and the camp's other organizers emphasized the importance of centering Hecate's entire transnational genealogy. They framed the week as an answer to the call of Heqet, patron Goddess of the margins to rise up and face the parts of our own shadows that keep us from our authenticity and power, to hone our collective powers for magical defense and offense against the state, to break curses and actively herald an age of restoration. At camp this year, Abel said, we will do magic for social justice. And in path,

[183] Specifically, the Reclaiming group called Decolonizing Actions in Reclaiming (DARC)

we will open the witch's eye so that we can collectively see the cords of energy woven by the carceral state, and we will support each other in the use of offensive magic to cut them. Chills pricked my neck, the roaring vacuum inside me suddenly alerted to a light, an emerging path to that home-fire place, and a way to break my Poppop's curse. And so I find myself here, a whole season and thousands of miles later seeking a praxis, seeking teachers, community, nuance, magical tools for liberation. Those chills return when Coyote and Abel introduce path with a drum-beat call to action:

> By the powers of Her torch, we ignite the power of inner sight.
>
> By the powers of Her daggers, we cut the cords from those who take.
>
> By the powers of Her serpents, we invoke the powers of regeneration.[184]

As the week of path weaves forward, Coyote and Abel teach us how to invoke Heqet as our leader and protector. We engage in deep conversations around her legacy, and how her erasure parallels the struggles of BIPOC within the witching community. We discuss the stickiness of seeking magical practices, as Coyote and Abel reveal that many of the methods they will show us are from their own culturally specific frameworks. This conjures a tension amongst the group, the tight question of how to amend this erasure without then committing cultural theft. I watch as all around me hands raise hesitantly and witches ask our teachers and each other how to engage respectfully with their knowledge in a way that doesn't steal, how to build our own knowledge in a way that breaks with Eurocentrism but thoughtfully so, with respect and care. I witness this eagerly, and our teachers respond lovingly and firmly. There's a difference in theft and sharing in a certain context like this one, where there's relationship, consent, and deference for their leadership. However, we are encouraged to meditate critically and honestly about the

[184] Vargas and Gomez, 2019

appropriateness of adapting these methods into our own repertoires when we leave camp. And about the possibilities of seeking methods from our own Ancestral traditions, whatever they may be. And most importantly, Coyote and Abel reveal how this tension acts as a blockage, stopping well-meaning white witches from doing anything because of the perceived sense of being caught between two sins. However, when we reveal this tension we can face it together, and it is the power of coalition which enables us to bind it. This is a salient foundation for what comes next.

From this grounding we move into learning that magical intervention in hegemonic violence is dangerous work because it requires us to enter sticky realms full of triggers and traps, traumas, memories, reactions, defenses. These are realms that we know to varying degrees with our own bodies, and that postcolonial scholars map as a matrix of intersecting nodes of power, "insist[ing] on the 'simultaneity' of the working axes of domination…to examine how oppression may be experienced in specifiably complex and shifting relationships to different axes of domination."[185] We learn from our teachers that before we can use ritual to find these nodes of coalescence between colonial power and discourse, and weapons of the state and the structures they support, we need to be strongly supported ourselves and we need to be comfortable with walking in the shadows. The first part of building this comfort is realizing that the binary understanding within mainstream witchcraft between "black" and "white" magic, between "shadow" and "light" work is rooted in racism and complacency, a vilification and equation of dark skin to darkness to evil to bad. This is a reality long-felt by BIPOC within our community and without it, necessitating ample and well-documented resistance by activists and scholars alike: "The paired terms 'Black' and 'White' easily lend themselves to the Manicheanisms of good/evil; matter/spirit; devil/angel.

[185] Frankenberg, Ruth and Lata Mani. "Crosscurrents, Crosstalk: Race, 'Post-Coloniality' and the Politics of Location," *Cultural Studies* 7:2, 1993, p.488

And since everyday speech posits blackness as negative ('black sheep,' 'black day'), and black and white as opposites ('its not a black and white issue') rather than as nuances on a spectrum, Black [people] have almost always been cast on the side of evil."[186] We learn that this light/dark dichotomy in the realm of magic is not only false but oppressive against our own community members within Reclaiming, because of the ways it weaves into and strengthens racism among us and also because it keeps us fragmented as people, stifling our ability to effectively use offensive magic within the web of power and oppression. We learn too that much of this phobia around "dark magic" is tied to our deep fear of looking at the things we are ashamed of in ourselves, the things that still live within us to the extent that they have inspired an entire discourse around identifying them as "the shadow," and the merits of shadow work. Hecate urges us to become intimate with the places within ourselves where the threads of colonialism and racism have become integral to our internal structures, the places where we are articulated through the axes of domination, because they sure as hell are going to be triggered when we attempt to engage with their larger systemic counterparts through ritual. We come to recognize magic as a powerful tool, not only for understanding on an embodied, spiritual level the "specifiably complex and shifting relationships to different axes of domination" that we all navigate in the web of power, but also for identifying points of opportunity for disruption and intervention in that web. In doing this together we are supported by each other, and in doing this with Heqet we are supported spiritually. This supported mapping of our own internal resonances with the nodes of domination initiates us, empowers us to tease out and cut those cords, enables us to begin the process of integration and transformation. Initiated, together, we turn outwards to

[186] Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*: *Multiculturalism and the Media,* Routledge, 1994, p.22

identify the parallel wounds and weapons of empire in each other and in our community. In coalition, we are protected, and we are armed, and we attack.

When they lead us in trance I feel emboldened to seek the texture of my shadows. When they bathe my eyes in salve and smoke I learn to see the networks from the astral realm, the axes of domination lit up like thick cords in a tapestry, weaving intersections with each other, channeling power and leaching life from land, people, communities into systems, institutions, empire. I see smaller, material and discursive threads weaving from these cords, creating the conditions for and rhetorical frameworks of Pagan witchcraft from colonial legacies and folk longings, connecting desire with theft with innovation with angelic resistance, full of restrictions *and* possibilities. I can see new threads too, ones I hadn't before of the places where Black and Brown witches have always been present in this discourse, and the places where those legacies are silenced even by me. And finally, the threads of my own seeking, my own practices, my own longing for home-fire braided together with the voice of my Poppop who says in a dream "you need to talk to Alex about breaking black magic." The micro-aggression in his racialized, binary assumptions about magic from beyond the grave woven in with his racism during his lifetime woven in with his place in the cycle of abuse and trauma in my lineage woven in with the places where that trauma still traps me in silence and fear. A face emerges from behind my eyes, small, vacuous and terrifying. A hollow doll, full of rage yet empty, reaching out with sticky hands that pull at my life force, pull from each memory of a little girl abused, a racist word, a fatherless boy, a cousin, an aunt, a sister, a mother. Things that are hidden, swept under the rug. Abusers who are protected. And eviction, and poverty, and addiction. A face that says, "if I can't have it, no one can." That says, "there will be no innocence for your children." That says, "I am *so*

hungry." And I understand that this curse is part of our familial legacy, a cycle that interrupts our ability to be whole from childhood and endures after death, and its ties are old and wrapped up in the traumas of empire. I can see the cords so clearly, the places where my Ancestors were hurt, removed from their lifeways and homes, and how those traumas became solidified when they turned to hurting others. Something one of them did along the way that attempted to vindicate their pain through the power they found in colonial violence, and the curse that this placed on the line. Their entrapment in the "working axes of domination," their articulation "within matrices of domination and subordination."[187] And I understand that my work to find a liberatory magical praxis, to untangle the white possessive formation of Pagan discourse that inspired my forbearers' competitive ownership of "true knowledge" and obsession with pagan survivals at the expense of their own folk practices, to unwed this possessiveness from my longing for rituals, spells, and home fire, is the same work I must do to break this curse. It is the work that Coyote and Abel lead me to, that Heqet calls me to do, and I am initiated.

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"Racism traces its deep psychic roots to fear of the 'other' (associated with a suppressed animalic 'shadowy' self) and to phobic attitudes toward nature and the body."

- Ella Shohat and Robert Stam 1994, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*[188]

Coyote and Abel intuitively make the connection between the Pagan discursive formation of the "shadow-self," our reluctance to investigate and integrate it, and the racism they and other BIPOC experience in Reclaiming and in the witchcraft community as a whole. In resonance with postcolonial scholars Frankenberg and Mani, they "insist on the 'simultaneity' of the workings of

[187] Frankenberg and Mani 1993, p.488
[188] Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*: *Multiculturalism and the Media,* Routledge, 1994, p.22

axes of domination," in order to forge a magical framework that's "born of political practice [and] critical to coalition building."[189] The ritual of opening the witch's eye, the revelation of braided networks of power offers a felt visualization of "'postmodern conjuncturalism'… [which] firmly centers the analysis of subject formation and cultural practice within matrices of domination and subordination,"[190] ultimately formulating a magical praxis that is post-colonial in that it "must be carefully specified, used to describe moments, social formations, subject positions and practices which arise out of an unfolding axis of colonization/decolonization, interwoven with the unfolding of other axes, in uneven, unequal relations with one another."[191] This post-colonial magic teaches us the necessity of visceral clarity around our arrival in these spaces, these practices, these bodies, and precision in locating the nodes of power we wish to attack on the spirit plane. We were sworn to secrecy around the details of that offensive magic, but the fullness of our collective visualization of this web, and the power of our collective action in attacking specific pieces of it, speaks volumes to the potential in such a magical framework for coalition building and intervention. It also creates space for contending with nuance, complexity and specificity, as our teachers guide us through the tension between our reluctance to commit cultural appropriation and its resulting manifestation as Eurocentrism, a phenomenon which Heqet's integration into the week's narrative structure explicitly challenges. Postcolonial scholars Shohat and Stam describe Eurocentrism as "the discursive residue or precipitate of colonialism, the process by which the European powers reached positions of economic, military, political, and cultural hegemony in much of Asia, Africa, and the Americas."[192] They add that because "the notion of a 'pure' Europe originating in classical Greece is premised on crucial

[189] Frankenberg and Mani 1993,
[190] Frankenberg and Mani 1993, p.488
[191] Ibid., p.489
[192] Shohat and Stam 1994, p.14

exclusions, from the African and Semitic influences that shaped classical Greece itself to the osmotic Shepardic-Judeo-Islamic culture that played such a crucial role in the Europe of the so-called 'Dark Ages'… Europe itself is in fact a synthesis of many cultures, Western and non-Western. It did not simply 'take in' non-European influences, it was constituted by them."[193] This complicates simplistic notions of cultural appropriation because such notions assume a uni-directional relationship between a homogenous west as the appropriator and a heterogenous non-west as the perpetually appropriated, rhetorically erasing the agency of those situated as non-western by this paradigm. Heqet couldn't have been a more salient Goddess to initiate this shift in Reclaiming culture, because by engaging in her worship we are inherently required to recognize her agency, to listen to the fullness of her story and realize that there is no white "Goddess of the witches," but that her arrival in our familiar cosmology was both precipitated and constituted by her birth in Egypt and her own travel across continents and millennia. Coyote and Abel's success in interrupting the ways that Reclaiming culture projects an archetypal "pure" European lineage, despite actually being a heterogenous formation creates space for actual instances of coalition building and cultural sharing, and is deeply tied to their choice to do so through a magical framework that "centers the analysis of subject formation and cultural practice within matrices of domination and subordination," in order to form magical coalition against nodes of power in that matrix. It also further complicates the process of seeking magical practices that resonate with me culturally, as I am shown another layer to the falseness of the idea of an "authentic" or "pure" magical practice, emphasizing instead the dynamics of power exchange that facilitate my access to any given practice or belief. My teachers in path, and Heqet herself teach me that if I understand that my own Ancestors' cultures were never homogenous

[193] Ibid.

but were actually culminations of varied exchanges and influences, and if I understand that cultural exchange cannot happen when there is an imbalance of power, then I need to address those power imbalances now in material ways, and let *this* be the guiding force that drives and precedes my spiritual development. Heqet is the keeper of the crossroads, illuminator of networks and matrices of domination, and she shows me that this is the key element of choosing the harder path, the path of integrity and social justice, and blessed am I to receive her guidance, to make that commitment.

"At the crossroads of hope and despair, we step into our power as witches. In this path, we open our witch eye and gaze into the forces of violence in our lives and in the world to name, expose, and bind them…We do this magic together. We do this magic in secret. We do this magic in service."

- Coyote Vargas and Abel Gomez 2019, *The Magic of Crossing and (Un)Crossing* Course Description

The Magic of Crossing and (Un)Crossing is an active call for witches to re-orient ourselves through a commitment to taking action, interrogating, un-doing, and re-doing "the historical structures of knowledge production that are rooted in various histories and geographies of modernity," resonating with Raka Shome's call for "a rigorous interrogation of the linkages between colonialism and knowledge," specifically our magical knowledge, and how it "is always subject to forces of colonialism, nation, geopolitics, and history."[194] They challenged us to identify the places where we are fragmented and complacent, and through this inventory find a

[194] Shome, Raka. "Postcolonial Approaches to Communication: Charting the Terrain, Engaging the Intersections." *Communication Theory* 12:3, 2002. P.249., pp.250-251.

way into the astral network of the matrices of power and domination. It is vital that we were led to that commitment through the space of solidarity and inter-cultural exchange opened up by the labor and leadership of the camp's BIPOC teachers. This was not easy labor for them, because in giving this offering Coyote and Abel became targets for the "psychic arrows" of defensiveness, the malicious reactivity of white fragility. What I learned quickly was that this offering sent waves throughout the entire camp because it posed a challenge to Reclaiming's core principle of "harm none," and its presence unsettled many members. Even larger than its challenge to Reclaiming's core principles was its challenge to the paradigms of popular witchcraft discourse in general- namely a shift from an eclectic, individualized and possessive collection of practices to a praxis which centers explicit analysis of our place in the matrix of power, offering through ritual a "central critical lens through which to name and theorize cultural conditions of contemporary society…[because it] theorizes the geographical, geopolitical, and historic specificities of modernities within which other forms of power- such as race, sexuality, culture, class, and gender- are located."[195] Coyote and Abel showed us how such an explicit tapping in to the networks of power, such a commitment to taking collective action against nodes of domination, functions through centering BIPOC agency, leadership, legacy and divinity. This is an imperative which requires both humility and risk, so it is no wonder that it's arrival at camp was so contentious. Just as Shome calls for scholars to explicitly incorporate post-colonial frameworks into their work in their own disciplines, to identify epistemologies of domination and try "to redo such epistemic structures by writing against them, over them, and from below them,"[196] I am inspired to ask what would happen were all witches to heed Abel's and Coyote's call to weave in and under the cords of power, to "employ the tools of magic as a force of

[195] Ibid. p.253
[196] Shome 2002, p.250.

resistance against oppression of our communities?"[197] Furthermore, how would doing so require us to seek reparation of the legacies of colonial violence inherent in our positions on stolen land, and inherent in the etymologies of Pagan witchcraft discourse, and inherent in the erasure of Black and Brown contribution to that discourse? And what would it mean to fulfil the romanticized counter-cultural positionality of the witch as revolutionary, to come to this identity through explicit and collective *actions* of political resistance and coalition building across the power matrix? *These* are the spiritual responsibilities inherent in becoming a witch, the divine work of excavation, solidarity and social action, and personal integrity that Heqet incites, and they emerge as the tenants of the praxis I so desperately seek. This is a responsibility I bear not only to other witches, but to myself and my family, as I learn to feel the connections between our familial curse and the weight of karmic debt inherited by our own entanglement in the axes of power. I am full of gratitude at this knowing, full of awe and respect for my Black, Indigenous, and Brown teachers, and full of humility in the face of the responsibility inherent in this gift, inherent in having received the benefit of their labor. This is something that I can only repay with a life's work.

What you may have are the stories

I take off my pants and peel away my shoes and socks as quickly as I can. After gathering them into a secure bundle, I hold them at my chest and take in a deep breath. I fix my gaze onto the opposite shoreline once more before looking down, to carefully but swiftly wade into thigh-deep water. It's so cold my bones ache all the way up to the hip. The water is sharp against my skin

[197] Vargas and Gomez, 2019

and I carefully move numb feet across wide rocks, racing to get across with just enough grace not to trip and fall in. By the time I step out onto the dense mud of the opposite side I'm numb from the knees down, the damp November air feels warm and the heat of my towel, socks, and shoes stings my toes back to life. Before moving on, I greet the shore and ask permission to gather three stones. I hear an immediate "yes" in my head, though I'm still not really sure how to tell the difference between my own desires and the actual consent responses of more-than-human beings. But I need to keep moving and I need these stones, so I quickly find one red, one white, and one black, rinse them in the water and turn to face the trail up the hill.

I still don't know if I'm on the right path, if I took the right fork (or was it the left?) in the long dirt road and I have no cell service and no map save a few curved lines generously drawn on a napkin. I'm warm again from walking, the same heat that has kept me sweating all day despite the cold dampness of late fall in the central Highlands of Scotland. The humidity is really remarkable- my skin and hair have been glowing all week, and I've never seen so many mosses and lichens before. They create a patchwork of black, deep green and shoal colors that break up the rolling hills, otherwise short-haired and golden from thinning, dying grass and with curving crags cut by tiny creeks that give the unmistakable appearance of the rolls on the back of a giant's thick neck. I found the entry to this path in Glen Lyon just like Scott had said I would, at the place where the dam meets the winding road so thin you could hold a piece of paper between the car and the wall. It was still dark when I got here, and now the sun lights up the clouds from high in the sky. I'm growing hungry for lunch, but I keep going, enjoying the task of measuring my jumps over the small creeks on the trail like I did when I was a kid. As I round a curve, I notice how this part of the trail was cut right into the hill. I can reach out my hand and touch its

bared dirt-flesh like a raw gash, bleeding red clay and variegated stones with a crown of grass on top. I flash to the wood-bones I'd seen an hour earlier, thick, round stumps of ancient trees so big I could've laid across them, bleached white from the sun and many many years of bareness. And the hills, barren of life save for grass, sheep, moss and the Rowan trees. There's an ache to this land. It hurts. I'm holding this feeling when I come around the bend and I see it, and the sight kicks my breath from my chest.

It's a small rectangular house made of thick stones, dwarfed on all sides by hills so tall they disappear into low mist-clouds. But it's all I can look at, dense and magnetic and loudly accompanied by a ringing in my ears. I want to run to it, but when I look down I see that the field between us is really a wide, very shallow river covered in clumps of earth and thick grass. How fitting that this last passage is liminal, a water-field that requires me to carefully find steps in earth patches so I don't sink in, balancing on thickets of grass as trickles of water flash from beneath sodden roots, the sounds of babbling and blowing grass mingling together. As soon as I make it through, I rush to the house. It's about chest-high, not counting the roof of grass, and I immediately start circling it to get a better look. I remember halfway through that I'm supposed to circle it three times counter-clockwise, and I smile when I realize I've already started the circuit. When I'm done, I stop at the face of the house, what would be the front door in the summer months. The Cailleach and her husband are sleeping inside, their effigy-stones tucked deep within the rocks and sealed in so well I can't even tell the outline of the door. This is something that the shepherds still do every year after Samhain, the Gàidhlig word for what Americans have adapted as Halloween. And then in the spring they'll let the family out again.

I know it's not the right season, but this was my only chance to make this trip with departmental funding, and I came all this way just to talk to her. My path to this glen is the culmination of a week of field research which began at the *Skelling, Skeklers, and Guising* conference at the Scottish Storytelling Center in Edinburgh. It was a day and a half of work centered around Scottish folk magic and death-lore, a celebration of liminality and an effort at cultural preservation. There I hungrily basked in the embodied performances of storytellers and scholars, allowing them to weave their stories, theories, and histories into my sense of the potentials in magical practice and cultural performance for collectively imagining into being a future outside of colonialism. It was a conference I'd seen on the *Cailleach's Herbarium* blog, that one and only resource I'd been able to find so far on practices from my own Ancestral lands. I'd emailed the writer Scott who also co-organized the conference, and he'd actually responded. And he'd actually met with me afterwards, took me to dinner and introduced me to two other Queer American students of Gàidhlig Ancestry, who lived in Scotland and were passionate about nourishing the revitalization of Gàidhlig language and culture, and the return of Gàidhlig sovereignty over the British-occupied land. The three of them were the ones who told me how to get to the glen, how to make an offering, how to address the Cailleach and how to interpret her answers through the slaik stanes (stones).

That's not all they told me. We talked for many hours into the night as Rhys and Rowan painted a picture of the movement to decolonize Scotland, the struggle of Gàidhlig-speaking peoples whose communities still nurture their ways in the farthest reaches of the isles despite severe economic, health, and political disadvantage, including in the Hebrides where according to family lore my own Ancestors come from. They told me of the deep layers of cultural shame that

elders still feel around speaking their own language, knowing their own lore, and the efforts of young people to revive the language even as they are forced to live in cities in search of work. They thoroughly and somewhat forlornly debunk my romantic ideas about Scottish culture- connecting what I know from my childhood of the Highland games, the kilts, the pipes, the family crests and tartans, the athletic competitions and songs and dances, to the efforts of British gentry to simultaneously eradicate and re-package Gàidhlig culture into something that easily fit the needs of the British empire for an inexhaustible warrior class. How the communal land-based structures of the Gàidhlig clan system were intentionally, over time converted to privatized land holdings, turning the people into agricultural renters or "crofters" on private land who were eventually and violently evicted to make space for sheep, raw material for the wool industry, in what is known as the Highland Clearances. How the land itself still suffers, its ecological diversity destroyed. How Gàidhlig children were sent to schools where they were humiliated and punished for speaking their language, how whole towns were forced to flee their burning homes, forced to gather on ships, and sent to the colonies with nothing but their own lives. And how even the unique tempo and drum rhythms of their music, and the shapes and sizes of their instruments were changed to become suitable for war-marches, as the evicted Gàidhlig warriors poured into the military for lack of any other opportunity for money or dignity. And then how those men became part and parcel of the colonizing forces of the British empire, deployed in whichever colonies suited it, repeating the cycle. And how tourists like myself pour into the land, misty-eyed over Braveheart and Game of Thrones and frequenting identical shops where you can find trinkets in your own family name (mine are Morrison and Cameron of Lochiel), never interested in knowing the truth behind this commercialized and anglicized version of the culture, never invested in the struggles of our relatives who're still exploited, still living in the direst of

conditions, still fighting for survival. Gàidhlig culture was never a monolith, and its folk practices are tied to having a relationship with the specific place where you live. The Cailleach herself is not one unified goddess but a title, literally meaning "Grandmother," a spirit who through mutual displays of hospitality between herself and her people nurtures the safety and fertility of the land. This is why the Pagan tendency to view the Cailleach as one unified being is hurtful- it erases the specificity and the context of who she is, or who they are, further anglicizing and erasing Gàidhlig tradition. This comes as a blow, a bubble burst as I connect to the deep sorrow and enduring rage of exploited land and dispossessed people. It's sobering to feel once again how my own quest for homeland, home fire is restrained by the confines of colonialism, twisting me into a tourist. Before we part ways for the night, they remind me to have respect for the specificity of the Cailleach of Glen Lyon, and they draw me a map.

Staying at arm's reach from the front of the stone home, I sit on my knees and gather the honey jar out of my bag and the three stones from my pocket. I hold the jar uncertainly, unsure of where exactly to pour it, not wanting to disturb the lichens on the stones but wanting to make sure she gets it. I end up pouring it on the rock of what I imagine to be the front door step, and then I knock three times on the stones of the doorway and call the Cailleach by name each time. Then I wait a moment, take the stones in my hands, and decide which sides mean up and which are down. Then I begin asking her questions. I ask, was my offering accepted? Did my Ancestors know this glen and her in particular? Was I allowed to take these stones home with me? To read the stones, you toss them for each question, take note of how they land and which realms the "yeses" and "nos" correspond to according to color. They each correspond to one of the three realms in Gàidhlig folk cosmology, land sea and sky. Red for blood and sea, white for bone and

land, black for flesh and sky.[198] This is quite different than what I'm used to in popular Pagan witchcraft, where worship involves invoking the four elements air, fire, water, and earth and the fifth element of center or spirit. As I toss the stones though, I'm shocked by the directness of this form of communication. It's no-nonsense, clear-cut and with less room for interpretation than I'm used to with Tarot decks or other divinatory methods. Very quickly a conversation unfolds. The Cailleach is not pleased that I have woken her up on a cold day, or that I littered her doorstep with honey instead of pouring it into a hole in the ground or a nearby rock. Or that I have the audacity to come here on this path cut through her hills, to see the red gash of the earth and the white bones of the logged forest and the glen barren of life save for moss and grass and sheep, to ask her if I can take something else. And while she knows the Cailleach of my Ancestors, she herself is not. This is not my hill, and I am an outsider, and because I am not here to stay there is nothing I can offer her to justify taking her treasures. Nothing I can offer to protect this Glen, to bring the people back. I am just like every other tourist, full of wanting and empty-handed.

I'm stung. I empty my pockets and my bag and take stock of the treasures I've gathered on my walk. Rowan sticks, unavailable to me back home and legendary for their protective magic, that I'd clamored up the slick hills to gather from the only trees resilient enough to survive the current climate of the glen. Thick, twisting black horns from the sheep who graze the hills, and a jawbone, and some other pretty stones I'd seen along the path. I want these things so badly it hurts. I've been dreaming of the chance to go to a place where I'm not a colonizer but a descendent, where I belong to the land and can gather real, authentic tools for real authentic

[198] For more details, see Scotts book. Richardson- Read, Scott. Tales of the Taibhsear: a chapbook on Scottish folk magic, Cailleach's Herbarium 2018, pp. 35-45

practices that come from *my* people, that speak to my Ancestors, that I can bring home and keep in a leather bag on my altar like a real folk practitioner. And I've been told no, I cannot have them. And no, however related and close this still isn't even the specific place where I belong to. I am still an outsider, and my romantic attitude is that of a tourist. I'm angry and ashamed. I came all this way. This is *it*, my only chance. This is the trip I've dreamed of, the reconnection I thought was going to show me what I've been missing, restore me to some kind of connection, and still I've done it in the fashion of possession, exemplifying the Anglicized culture that replaced what I could have had many generations ago. And if this quest is empty, what do I have left? Where else can I go to find the path to home-fire? What else is there if I leave empty handed? And why can't I just have something, *anything* that resonates with me magically and didn't arrive in my hands through a web of exploitative exchanges? I consider taking them anyway, knowing however that to do so would be futile. Even a rudimentary understanding of fairy tales teaches you not to steal from spirits. The vacuum inside me roars at the thwarted expectation of fulfilment. So I sit, waiting for the lesson that must be somewhere in this moment.

All at once a great rush fills my ears, like wind or the ringing of a thick bell or the crackling of a fire. I feel the weight of a hand gently land on my shoulder and I get the unmistakable feeling of a crowd of people gathered behind me. There comes a knowing right into my head, like a thought but it's not mine. It says: you've been searching, but we've always been right here. You don't need these things to talk to us, to make offerings to us, to ask us to work on your behalf. You don't need anything more than your own body, and your integrity, and humility. I close my eyes and say thank you, and I sit breathing in the lesson and drinking in the connection, letting it fill the void like water in a dry well. Letting it lead me, finally, to the place where my Ancestors

who remember how to be Ancestors are gathered around the fire, waiting for me. Of course. Something clicks, something so contrary to what I'm used to in the realm of popular Pagan magic that it has taken me years of work, the labor of many teachers, and a scolding from the Grandmother of this glen to learn: magic isn't about manifesting intentions, manipulating energy, or divination, or finding the correct rituals and tools. It's something that resonates with Indigenous feminist wisdoms of reciprocity, with Black witch commitments to community action for social justice, and with the way my mother builds little house and leaves little gifts outside for the spirits. It's about relationship, specificity, and responsibility, the knowledge that 'authenticity' is a hollow concept compared to what we are all born with, which is the connection we have to our Ancestors, the ones who answer the calls of spell work and through whom we access the spiritual realm. No number of tools, practices, or pilgrimage will ever fill the void of simply being in relationship with my lineage, and reciprocating connection to the specific places where I find myself, and *this* is the nourishment that counteracts that vacant hole, that white possession. And this is how I ground myself, how I feed my own needs so that when I do rise to meet other witches, when I deign to engage in coalition and acts of solidarity with Black, Indigenous, and Brown people, I have my own ground to stand on, my own resources to bring to the table, my own culture to share. They have another message for me too: *learn our language*. Remember the story of our people, where we come from and who we became, and restore our honor by living your life as an amends for the violence we perpetuated as it was perpetuated against us. This is your duty in this lifetime, and we will aid you in its pursuit. I rest here a moment, offer my gratitude again and bring to a close my conversation with the Cailleach. Her final message is this: take not one stick, stone, or bone from the Glen. What you may have are the stories.

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"You can't know reciprocity until you know the gift."

Robin Wall Kimmerer 2013, *Braiding Sweetgrass*[199]

What I received from the Cailleach was more than a scolding, but the gift of responsibility. She held up a mirror that challenged me to see how it's possible to fetishize one's own Ancestors, to be a tourist in their land, and how the simplest acts of humility, respect and reverence are in and of themselves the initiation, the spiritual fulfilment I seek. And how this entails specific relationships to specific places, which can't be built in a week of travel but requires meaningful, long-term acts of commitment and care for both the land and the people of the land. It also makes sense that I wouldn't deeply know this, despite spending so much time unearthing the possessive discursive threads within the version of witchcraft I'm familiar with, despite learning from many teachers and reading many works by Black and Indigenous and People of Color scholars. And despite learning the legacy of settler colonialism that to this day seeks to destroy the remainder of Gàidhlig culture and sovereignty, and how my own Ancestors' entrapment in this legacy twisted them into colonizers themselves, cursing our line with the illnesses of empire: addiction, abuse, rape, racism, poverty. Neverending hunger. The roots of property run so deep, seeds planted by empire at the formation of whiteness and fed by generations of possession, removing me so far from the possibility of being in relationship to land, conceiving of community, that despite my own intentions I have even in the pursuit of my own culture, been running on possessive paradigms. Feeling the intense ache of the paradox of white desire for something that cannot be possessed, an ache that postcolonial scholar Maria Mies speaks to as

[199] Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis MA, 2013, p.471

the search for "fulfilment of the desire for wild nature," which "means that, although the search is for the 'real thing' the 'real life', the commodity-producing system can only provide this in a symbolic, sentimental and romanticized form of fulfilment…they enjoy them only as consumers not actors or creators."[200] This hollow longing is so counterintuitive to what Goeman teaches us about how "Indigenous peoples make place by relating both personal and communal experiences and histories to certain locations and landscapes," which is why "settler colonialism demands a careful vigilance of land, because with land dispossession the recognition of our personhood would also be denied… 'Possession- the act necessary to lay the basis of property was defined to include only the cultural practices of whites.'"[201] This condition of being in hunger, of doomed consumption, drains the life from me and in so doing keeps me tied to the reproduction of its conditions, to the fetishization of authenticity, the separation from place, the possessive taking of tools and practices, the reliance on discursive knowledge gathered by colonists hundreds of years ago to assuage their own aching at the onset of empire.

"And just as Windigo's bite is infectious, we all know too well that self-destruction drags along many more victims- in our human families as well as in the more-than-human world."

- Robin Wall Kimmerer 2013, *Braiding Sweetgrass*[202]

Robin Wall Kimmerer speaks to the monstrous state of neverending hunger, the place of suspension between desire and object when she writes of the Windigo: "Windigo is the name for

[200] Mies, "White Man's Dilemma: His Search for What he Has Destroyed," *Ecofeminism*, eds. Mies, Maria, Vandana Shiva and Ariel Salleh. 2014. P.143.
[201] Goeman 2015, p.74 with in-quote from Harris, C. I. "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106:8, 1993, pp.1707-91.
[202] Kimmerer 2013, p.378

that within us which cares more for its own survival than for anything else," an "Ojibwe boogie-man" whose cautionary tales reveal traditional wisdom around the emptiness of consumption and the danger of possession, the pursuit of which is as contagious as it is destructive to our communities and to ourselves.[203] "It is said that the Windigo will never enter the spirit world but will suffer the pain of eternal need, its essence a hunger that will never be sated. The more a Windigo eats, the more ravenous it becomes. It shrieks with its craving, its mind a torture of unmet want. Consumed by consumption, it lays waste to humankind."[204] I remember reading its story months ago for class, even discussing it in-depth with my professor Danika who urged me to weave the warning of the Windigo into my thesis work. And I remember how at the time I resonated so deeply with its hunger that it raised the hairs on my arms and neck, a fact I quickly hid because I didn't want to feel myself so viscerally tied to this villainous husk, this perfect parallel for whiteness, this monstrous resonance with my own Poppop's eternally withering condition, stuck in the place between worlds. Kimmerer shows us how to trace the footsteps of the Windigo in settler culture and capitalism, in how "multinational corporations have spawned a new breed of Windigo that insatiably devours the earth's resources 'not for need but for greed.' The footprints are all around us, once you know what to look for,"[205] and these "Windigo footprints…they are the tracks of insatiable consumption. So many have been bitten… It is the Windigo way that tricks us into believing that belongings will fill our hunger, when it is belonging that we crave."[206] This last phrase echoes on and on for me: "when it is *belonging* that we crave." What a craving, a drive that led me all the way here to this glen just to harvest objects because of what I think they will to do connect me, to lead me to the fire. But in her refusal to

[203] Ibid. p.379
[204] Ibid. p. 377
[205] Ibid. p.379
[206] Ibid. p.381

feed my desire for possession, the Cailleach has shown me instead the gift of belonging. She has revealed the futility of my pursuit to the extent that I am finally forced to relinquish it, to lay down in my emptiness and in that stillness I am at last able to hear the voices of my Ancestors. A week later after I've arrived back home and caught up on sleep, I return to Kimmerer's story of the Windigo. There's a part I had missed, a final chapter called "Defeating Windigo" in which she shares its antidote: "Here is the arrow that weakens the monster of overconsumption, a medicine that heals the sickness: its name is plenty…when abundance reigns the hunger fades away and with it the power of the monster."[207] I close the book and hold it close to my chest, allowing my eyes to shake and well up with gratitude for Kimmerer's generosity in sharing this warning and this lifeline of an antidote, for my professor's wisdom in connecting me to this story, and for the Cailleach in her resonance with this wisdom when she saw my hunger and gave me the gift of plenty. I am nourished by this gift even now, and this belonging and purpose shows me with my body what Kimmerer means when she says that abundance comes only with reciprocity, which means that it comes with responsibility. It's my duty to name and honor the warning of the Windigo, the generosity of my teachers, and the gift of the Cailleach herself when she charged me to tell this story. And most importantly, it is my personal and spiritual duty to walk with this knowledge back to the land where I am a settler, so that I can begin to make amends.

"Storytellers, in all informal and formal forms, make space come alive by imparting an anticolonial knowledge that travels and connects to other knowledge systems."

- Mishuana Goeman 2015, "Land as Life: Unsettling the Logics of Containment"[208]

[207] Ibid. p.466
[208] Goeman 2015, p.74

When I come back home I begin to study Gàidhlig language, culture and stories. I learn quickly that for most of its life it has been an oral culture, one which places immense social and political value on the role of story and story tellers. Inspiration is considered divine, and poetic and narrative training takes decades.[209] This affirms the Cailleach's imperative: what you may have are the stories. It also resonates with the story-wisdom of Indigenous feminist epistemologies, Black feminist story-theory methodologies, and with the radical edge of rhetoric's critical autoethnography. Story is an embodied, emotional, and social pedagogy, and it is essential to the responsibility I feel towards the teachers I've found in scholars, witches, Ancestors, spirits and place. Though I don't quite know how, I'm convinced that story is essential to the task of tracing the Windigo footprints in myself and those around me, in my family, my community, and in the witching discourses I have access to. There are others doing this work already, like Ohlone and Chumash writer Kanyon Coyotewoman and white anti-racist witch Liam Harwyn, who call for the need to complicate the homogenizing, a-cultural ethos of whiteness as essential to the process of decolonization and spiritual solidarity. The two collaborated to form a list of imperatives for white settler witches engaging in decolonial allyship including the need to: "Examine whiteness as a myth that needs to be dismantled and decomposed. We embrace the complexity of the many ancestral cultures… from Europe instead of the monolith of calling oneself 'white'. We create a future where 'white' doesn't exist anymore."[210] This is something we have to do if white settlers are to be capable of engaging responsibly in relationships of solidarity with the struggles of Indigenous, Black, and Brown people. Let alone if we are to be in spiritual coalition. I am certain

[209] Newton, Michael. "Reclaiming the Roots: Gàidhlig culture and tradition," *Hidden Glen Folk School Course Pack*, Spring 2020

[210] Coyotewoman, Kanyon of @KanyonKonsulting and Lauren Harwyn of @Witchwaytotheforest, *Envisioning a Decolonizing Culture of the European Diaspora*, Instagram 2019.

that story is a part of this work, because it has the power to remind us that "each of us comes from people who were once Indigenous. We can reclaim our membership in the cultures of gratitude that formed our old relationships with the living earth," because "Gratitude is a powerful antidote to the Windigo pyschosis… It celebrates cultures of regenerative reciprocity, where wealth is understood to be having enough to share and riches are counted in mutually beneficial relationships."[211] This story is my initiation, the birth of a spiritual practice whose tenants are gratitude, responsibility, and humility. A composting of the quest for authenticity into the seeds of integrity. And it is the beginning of my life's work.

"I don't find answers. Only the capacity to dig deep inside, purging my past in an attempt to help someone else's ability to deal with their own shit. These are my stories. Our stories."

- Amber Johnson 2020, "Beauty in the Intersections: Reflection on Quiet Suffering"[212]

[211] Kimmerer 2013, p.468
[212] In Johnson and LeMaster 2020, p.112

V

Conclusion

Ends and Beginnings

Before I write I remember Anzaldua's ritual, her offerings of candles and water to the musa bruja who helps her exorcise the words from her body and spirit.[213] I make my own offering, red wine for Heqet, oats and whiskey for the Cailleach, tea and flowers for the Ancestors, and I roll on the Trinity knowledge oil I bought from the Bossy Bruja.[214] This writing is not often easy, but the rituals do help. Sometimes I can get into the flow of it, and most of the time I struggle against each paragraph, feeling this thesis like a weight hanging over me, a commitment I can never fulfill, an interrogation. I am riddled with anxiety about what people will think, my advisors, my friends, my community members. Or else, I am feeling really connected and positive about the possibility of my work facilitating change within the witching community, or forwarding the call within the communication discipline to explore more storied, more reflexive methodologies. It's a relief to take a dose of humility and remember that it's more likely not a lot of people will read this. But I do know that someone will, and that someone's path might be a little brighter for it. If anything, it is rewarding for myself to see such a material culmination of the last several years of my life, even if some parts of it make me cringe.

In this thesis, or if you are reading it after August of 2020 in this zine, I seek to wed my experiences of activism, scholarship, and Pagan witchcraft community together through storied

[213] Anzaldúa 1999, p.72
[214] @BossyBruja on Instagram, shop link is https://bossybruja.com

theory, in order to give an honest account of my own transformation through both scholarship and community action. I do this for many reasons. Because I want to honor the Queer interracial organizing community who saw me, built me up, opened my eyes and inspired in me an ethic of accountability and critical analysis of the world around me. Because I want to heed the call of scholars like Lisa Flores,[215] Langford and Speight,[216] Nakayama and Krizek[217] to engage in reflexive scholarly praxes that explicitly seek to interrogate and disrupt colonialism and racism within the academy. Because I have felt so lonely and desperate in my search for a spiritual practice that resonates with me and doesn't steal, erase, or perpetuate violence against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities. And because in engaging in this personal journey and coming to a place of fulfilment and purpose, I believe that I might be able to help someone else do this too. Specifically, I seek to demonstrate through the stories of my own experience that it's possible to be a white scholar who engages with racism and whiteness in transparent and productive ways and who is generous and respectful towards the communities we "study," it's possible to be a white witch whose spiritual praxes contribute to the liberation and decolonization of BIPOC and these lands, and finally that Pagan witchcraft communities, rituals, and identities themselves are powerful sites of potential for politicized, action-oriented transformation and coalition building. I approach Pagan witchcraft as a distinct discursive formation with complex etymologies that are entangled in the origins of the industrial, settler colonial, and white possessive culture we live in, and in so doing seek to demonstrate the value of this kind of etymological work to witches and scholars alike, as well as to defend the validity of Pagan witching discourse as a rhetorically powerful entity in and of itself. I do this through a

[215] Flores 2016
[216] Langford and Speight 2015
[217] Nakayama and Krizek 1995

methodology which communication scholars call critical autoethnography, or most recently intersectional autoethnography[218], which is a transparent weaving of narrative and theory in order to synthesize a more felt, embodied picture of the relationship between popular Pagan discourse and colonial rhetoric.

Of course, I have to say that there are limits to what I can do within my storied methodology, namely that I can only speak to my experience and the experiences of others that have been directly shared with me either personally or through their own scholarship. This also means that my scope is limited to the parts of popular Pagan witchcraft that I have had access to via my study of its history, my participation in group rituals like at Witchcamp, and my access to online spaces like Instagram, popular texts like spell books and grimoires, and of course the little witch shops I visit. I can't know or speak to the motives and desires of all witches, only myself and that which I see represented in commonly circulating discourse. I also don't have the space within this work to do the deep, detailed mapping of popular witchcraft's etymologies that I would like to do in the future. Such an undertaking doesn't lend itself well to a storied method, or to the limited space of a hundred or so pages. But what I have done, I think, is give myself an accessible, personal, and transparent foundation upon which to build future work.

In chapter one I recounted four short vignettes of my time at California Witchcamp, each followed by moments outside the narrative where I incorporated scholarly theory in order to process what I experienced. I wrote this as a thank-you to the organizers and teachers of camp, and to popular Pagan witchcraft as a whole. I mean for it to be an honest account of my own

[218] Johnson and LeMaster, 2020

personal investment in Pagan witchcraft spaces, and an anchor that reminds myself and the reader of the potentials within community ritual space for personal and collective healing, the transformation of grief into action, the magic of Queer worldmaking, and the fostering of a sense of political responsibility as integral to the formation of a witch identity. In order to do this I relied on Queer theoretical concepts like trans monstrosity[219], transing space,[220] queer-relationality across time[221] and the resilience and rhetorical power of AIDS activism,[222] as well as a combination of trauma and performance theoretical concepts like relational witnessing[223] and ritualized play[224] as sites of collective navigation of trauma and identity formation. I attempted to be transparent about my own moments of vulnerability and discomfort as a way to trace the impacts these moments had on the formation of my guiding questions when it comes to developing an emancipatory witchcraft praxis, especially around witchcraft as a site of spiritual responsibility towards Black, Indigenous, and People of color, and the necessity of our participation in the processes of decolonization and rematriation of the land,[225] concepts I rely on Indigenous feminist theory to contextualize. I concluded the chapter with an articulation of my guiding questions around what a witchcraft community can and should require of its participants as part of our initiation into the craft, as well as my own commitment to actively nurturing the possibility of a witchcraft community praxis of political responsibility.

[219] Stryker 1994
[220] Stryker 2008
[221] Muñoz 2019
[222] Woubshet 2015
[223] Franklin and Lyons 2016
[224] Huizinga 1949; Winnicott 1971; Ancelet 2001; Myerhoff 1982
[225] Tuck and Yang 2004

Chapter two is a step back in linear time, consisting of two narrative vignettes which account for the year of academic work and the two years of activist work preceding it that led to my scholarly focus on witchcraft and my research trip to California Witchcamp. These two are the most dense narratives in the work as far as their relationships to theory, because I give an account of my encounter and integration of scholarly work within the narrative itself. Each vignette is followed by afterwards which step outside of the narrative in order to integrate it more fully with the theoretical concepts I had access to at the time. I attempted to remain true to the processual development of my mindset and theoretical framework as they grew in time and relation to theory, so I only cited works from my syllabi and research papers. I intentionally tried to display my imperfect and messy process of integration, complete with my own moments of complacency, desire, and perpetuation of colonial logics, in order to model the ethic of accountability I seek to uphold as well as to offer a roadmap for others engaged in resonant journeys. Specifically, the first vignette accounts for my arrival at graduate school and the deep network of relationships I built in activist community that completely shaped my own analytical lens and ethical commitments. I was honest about the experiences of burnout and loss I experienced in community organizing for social justice which led me to seek a productive escape in the form of graduate education. I then shared how the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color theorists and scholars I read during my first semester helped me to contextualize my own experiences within Black-led movements,[226] inspired me towards a scholarly praxis of explicit self-reflexivity[227] and active disruption of whiteness in academic spaces,[228] and demonstrated anti-colonial methodologies such as story-theory.[229]

[226] Langford and Speight 2015; Green 2916
[227] Shome 2016
[228] Shome 2016; Nakayama and Krizek 1995
[229] Moraga, Cherríe and Gloria Anzaldúa 1981; Anzaldúa 1999

The second vignette describes the assertion of magic back into my realm of focus in the form of a dream my mother had and a call to action from my own recent Ancestor, and the moment where I realized that I could use the supported space of graduate research to seek a magical praxis aligned with my own political and ethical commitments. I described the moments of intellectual and spiritual crisis that arose for me when the confluence of witchcraft history and Indigenous feminist theory made it blatantly obvious to me that the discursive formation of Pagan witchcraft is deeply entangled in the simultaneous developments of industrialism, colonialism, and whiteness.[230] I began to map my own perpetuation of specific elements of witching discourse and desire that are tied to settler tactics such as imperialist nostalgia,[231] settler myths of belonging to indigenous land,[232] and the fetishization of authenticity and wildness that comes with wanting to "play Indian."[233] I was distraught by this, and sought to get to the root of my own desires for belonging to a community that resonates with my own Ancestry, a place I call the home-fire. I concluded with how this unsettling of my own spiritual beliefs led me to commit to developing the possibilities for an ethical spirituality in the context of colonialism and racism, one that emphasizes my responsibility to the Indigenous places and people that I live amongst now.

Chapter three recounts two key stories that emphasize praxis, i.e. what it might look like to build a witchcraft community, practice, and identity through coalition, accountability, and responsibility. The first story takes us back to California Witchcamp, specifically to the class or

[230] Hutton 1999; Gibson 2018; Urban 2006
[231] Aldred 2000
[232] Goeman 2015
[233] Deloria 1998

"path" that I took during the week I was there and to a deeper account of the salience of Heqet as the patron Goddess for this work. I described my teachers Coyote and Abel's work to use the space of camp to critique the white possessive and Eurocentric threads within Pagan witching culture, including but not limited to the privilege an complacency inherent in "love and light" only witchcraft, the damage of binary understandings of "dark vs light" magic,[234] and the power of integration in the form of shadow work. I described how by centering the agency and enduring contribution of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color witches to Reclaiming's legacy, Abel and Coyote were able to complicate simplistic notions of cultural appropriation,[235] and model effective dynamics of coalition building and explicit political action through ritual as vital to the power of the witch. They effectively and intuitively guided us in ritual to an embodied visualization that resonates with postcolonial theorists' mappings of global matrices of oppression,[236] and they led us in using magic to actively intervene in those nodes of power. In this ritualized mapping, I also came to understand the connection between my own Ancestral curse which pushed me back into a focus on magic, my family's entanglements in the axes of domination and resistance, and my work to dislodge Pagan witchcraft from these same entanglements. I concluded with an afterwards which synthesizes Coyote and Abel's ritual pedagogy with postcolonial theory in order to name the brilliance of my teachers and celebrate their demonstration of the potentials for witchcraft as a site of politicization, coalition, and action, and I also commited on my own part to fulfilling such a praxis in my life and through my work to share these stories.

[234] Shohat and Stam 1994
[235] Ibid.
[236] Frankenberg and Mani 1993

The final vignette is temporally the most recent and represents the culmination of my research and self-search. I recounted my experience of travelling to the *Skelling, Skeklers, and Guising* conference at the Scottish Storytelling Center in Edinburgh, the conversations I had afterwards with fellow researchers and students of Scottish folk magic, and my subsequent pilgrimage to the folk shrine of the Cailleach of Glen Lyon in the central Highlands. I traced my motives for going, namely to fulfil my urgent longing for connection to the practices of my Ancestors, the seeking of home-fire. I was transparent about the experience of coming face-to-face with the legacies of colonialism in my own Ancestral homelands as I learned of the sovereignty and survival struggles of Gàidhlig peoples, and how my conversation with the Cailleach revealed my own romanticism and possessive desires for objects that represent it. I contended with how my own approach resonated with the same colonial paradigms that seek to destroy and consume Black and Indigenous cultures around the world, and even my own Ancestral Gàidhlig culture, the same paradigms I had been outlining and seeking to confront throughout my work. I described how in the process of accepting the Cailleach's scolding and facing my own motives for my approach, I was finally greeted and welcomed by a crowd of my Ancestors. It was my familiarity with the Indigenous feminist concepts of land as pedagogy and lifeway,[237] and reciprocity and responsibility as vital to belonging,[238] that facilitated my openness to receiving this message from my Ancestors: I cannot connect to them through any amount of pilgrimage or ownership of authentic objects and practices, but rather it is in fulfilling my duty to end the cycles of colonial trauma done to them and perpetuated by them, that I can finally find my way to the fire where they are all waiting for me. And finally, I was given the command to share this knowledge through story. In the afterwards of this vignette I drew a parallel between my own

[237] Goeman 2015; Goeman 2013
[238] Kimmerer 2013

driving hunger for spiritual and cultural fulfilment and the state of the Windigo, an Ojibwe villain that Robin Wall Kimmerer likens to the aching emptiness of settler culture.[239] This parallel also functioned to reaffirm both the power of reciprocity and the gift of story in restoring my own humanity and my ability to participate in meaningful relationships with the land and people where I live now. I ended with a commitment to living this practice, seeking to disrupt the cultural amnesia of whiteness through story, and letting concrete acts of reparation and coalition be the guiding forces of my spiritual journey. This story marks the beginning of a new chapter in my life where I shift from seeking to practicing, and my success will be measured by the legacy I leave behind.

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"But, in reconstructing the traumas behind the images, I make 'sense' of them, and once they have 'meaning' they are changed, transformed. It is then that writing heals me, brings me great joy."

- Gloria Anzaluda 1999, *Borderlands*[240]

I am not alone in being driven to my scholarly work by experiencing and witnessing traumas, or by the drive to fulfil a deep longing, and I'm also not alone in finding peace and fulfilment in this work. What most excites me now are the possibilities I have uncovered for myself of approaching witchcraft as a site of coalition building across lines of power, and of individual and collective transformation through ritual, community, and practice. Of course sometimes this is shameful work, like the moments when I find yet another piece of concrete evidence to support Anzaldua's insight that "white America has only attended to the body of the earth in order to

[239] Ibid.
[240] Anzaldúa 1999, p.70

exploit it, never to succor it or to be nurtured in it." There is still hope though: "Instead of surreptitiously ripping off the vital energy of people of color and putting it to commercial use, whites could allow themselves to share and exchange and learn from us in a respectful way."[241] I am avid in my pursuit of the respectful way, the way of coalition and mutual liberation. After the shame comes excitement when I map the racist paradigms and colonial legacies of my own Pagan practices, because I know from experience that through authentic and humble engagement with these etymologies Pagan witches can manifest identities, practices, and cultures in which we are fulfilled by our acts of reciprocity, nourished when we take responsibility for ending the cycles of theft, erasure, oppression and trauma within our practices and our lives, in which solidarity, accountability, and political duty are synonymous with what it means to become a witch. And since starting this work, I have been immensely energized to witness a proliferation of this kind of anti-racist, decolonial edge of witchcraft, almost exclusively led by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color witches. In fact, I am humbled to realize that myself and much of my white Pagan witch community are arriving late to the game.

For example, Lakeesha Harris is a revolutionary educator, activist, and Black witch who speaks to the process of re-claiming the witch identity for Black women as a site of political power and anti-colonial healing. She asserts that "For Black people, there's the fallacy that witchcraft derives from Europe. For example, the Salem Witch Trials were all about white women and men dying but rarely discussed is how, since enslavement, Black women have always faced death for conjuring."[242] Harris reclaims this legacy, and in so doing welcomes Black women and Queers

[241] Anzaldúa 1999, p.68

[242] Harris, Lakeesha. "Healing Through (Re)Membering and (Re) Claiming Ancestral Knowledge about Black Witch Magic," Eds. Perlow, Olivia, Durene Wheeler, Sharon Bethea and BarBara Scott, *Black Women's Liberatory*

back to Ancestral healing traditions, re-framing the label of witchcraft that has been leveraged against their communities for hundreds of years by white colonial powers with the purpose of interrupting communal legacies of inter-generational healing and Ancestor reverence, community care, and connection to place. She founded both the *Black Witch Chronicles* and *Black Witch University* in order to support Black women and Queers in sustaining their own communities and weaving communal healing magic back into the work of Black liberation and social justice activism. She also speaks to the "ongoing colonization of Black witchcraft by white people/ culture that frequently appropriate it, failing to credit those who portrayed it and invisibilizing/ erasing Black witches from modern portrayals of witchcraft. There is the lack of acknowledgment that *we* are the source of *their* information."[243] Harris's resistance to white hunger, her commitment to herself and her community, and her integrity to her Ancestral traditions exemplifies the potency of the witch as a site of identity and imagination, and exemplifies the kind of leadership and experience that white witches need to respect, honor, and uplift if we are to redeem our legacies, become forces against colonialism and white possession, and in so doing forge just praxes.

> "I realized that research can change a person, and by extension, our world. Much like the opposite of demolishing a building and breaking the bridges that connect us to our pasts, writing down these narratives generates an archive of experience that may never die; our stories, memories, and connections not only live on, but keep changing the world into one worth preserving."

Pedagogies: Resistance, Transformation, and Healing within and Beyond the Academy, Palgrave MacMillan 2018, p.255

[243] Ibid.

- Amber Johnson and Benny Lemaster 2020, *Gender Futurity, Intersectional Autoethnography: Embodied Theorizing from the Margins*[244]

This research has changed me. It has helped me to feel out the confines of my desires for belonging and seek a new pathway to spiritual fulfilment, one which requires accountability and tangible action towards dismantling whiteness and colonialism. And while I hold its intrinsic merit and I value the "archive of experience" I have created in these pages, next steps for me looks less like written work and more like a research of the body. I need to seek out and grow with the people and spaces already doing this kind of work- like Camille Langston, or @theReikiMedicineGoddess whose "Justice for Juneteenth" ritual I attended. It was an open resource free for Black people and paid for by non-Black people, in which we were guided to invite our Ancestors to the movement for Black lives through a process of holding them accountable for their past actions and to aiding us in ending racism.[245] What a powerful moment of coalition! There's also a group called the Modern Witch's Confluence, who seek to support BIPOC witches as leaders, teachers, and attendees to their events. They provide free tuition to BIPOC witches and discounted rates for Queer and other marginalized identities, to attend a variety of workshops, many of which explicitly address racism in the witching world among other things.[246] And there's Edgar Fabián Frías, who creates virtual spells for liberation and co-facilitated an opening in communication with revolutionary Trancestors to aid in their activism.[247] And even Reclaiming culture is shifting as DARC, a coalition of BIPOC in Reclaiming push for an explicit reframing of its core values and operational complacency in

[244] Johnson and LeMaster 2020, p.4
[245] Langston, Camille. @theReikiMedicineGodess, Instagram. 2020.
[246] @theWitchesConfluence
[247] @EdgarFabiánFrías

racism.[248] The list goes on; the work is already in full swing to explicitly re-create the witch through an initiation of coalition and action for social justice, and I could not be more excited to join in.

[248] The Decolonizing Action in Reclaiming (DARC) salon on changing the principles of unity, to be held Aug 15 2020. I will be in attendance.

VI

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